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WITH A SWIFT SPRING THE SPORT BOUNDED PAST THEM ALL, AND TORE THE SHOCK OF HAIR FROM THE STRANGER.

OR, Doghole Dick's Drop.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE TIE-TO SPORT," "FARO
FRANK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

GREY BURKE CALLS THE TURN.

It was half an hour before the stage was due at Box Elder, and the saloon across the way from the Eureka Hotel had filled with its usual quota of loungers, who regularly gathered to see the "hearse" arrive.

There was one man there, however, who was a comparative stranger.

He had landed in the town a week before, coming no one knew exactly from where. As he had been riding a wiry little pony when first discovered in the main street, and as there was no one who remembered having seen him outside of the limits of Box Elder, he might have made any statement he chose about himself without there being any evidence to discredit it.

It had not taken him long to get the hang of the town, nor did it take the town long to get the run of him.

He was evidently a sporting man, and since he had arrived had been doing fairly well, though without having struck a run of luck which could be called wonderful.

For that reason, and because he had as good a chance to work advantages as any single sport could have done, and had not been detected, it was considered that he was a "square man" with the pasteboards.

His name was Grey Burke, so he said.

During the day little was seen of him as a general thing, but now the loungers recalled that he had put in an appearance the last time the stage came in, and watched its arrival with an eagerness which none of them displayed.

He was a rough-spoken man when he did speak, but, as a rule, was inclined to silence, so it attracted some attention when he showed more than usual loquacity.

"Hello, Burke!" exclaimed one of the sports of Box Elder, who had made his acquaintance across a table, and who had arrived at some degree of familiarity.

"Come up, and join us. Stage won't be here for half an hour. There's enough of the boys watching for it, and they can see it when it passes the turn, a mile away. You'll have good notice."

"Thankee, pard; but not this time. We've drunk together, so y'er knows I'm not puttin' on style when I say you'll have to let me off just now."

And the feverishness of his manner gave a hint that more was expected than a simple sight of the coach as it would come bowling down the one long street of the town and draw up with a flourish in front of the Eureka.

The sport laughed lightly as he passed the decanter toward several of his friends, who were standing up at the bar with him.

"All right, old man! Have it to suit yourself. Must be looking for somebody."

Burke nodded and craned his neck out of the door to take another look up the street.

"Mrs. Burke, maybe? Don't blame you for not wanting to down a sample of Box Elder's benzine on such an interesting occasion. The scent carries a mile, and she might think you had been traveling in the ways of the wicked."

He spoke lightly, and was hardly prepared for the scowl that was on the face of the man as he turned slowly in the doorway.

The look was a negative, and something more.

Grey Burke evidently did not desire the questioning to go farther.

The sport understood, but was not inclined to drop the matter.

"Ah! Kids, perhaps? No? Friend, maybe? Pard of your youth? Introduce me, will you? I'll see that Box Elder does him proud."

Almost anything will do as subject-matter for conversation in a little mining town like Box Elder, and when a subject was started there it was a trifle hard to get it stopped.

"Ye'r 'way off," answered Burke, at length, recovering his coolness by an effort.

"I hed a pard wunst, but he's dead. This are the other sort."

"This? Which? You're a little off, ain't you? I don't see him."

"But ye'r will. This time he's comin', sure. I feel it in my bones. An' then I'll give him one fur ther sake ov poor old Dan that ranged up to him game as a pebble."

"And found he carried too many guns?"

suggested the sport, who understood instinctively the story.

"Yes, curse him! He downed Dan, the first turn. Dan war' my pard, sport, and I swore I'd get even on the next deal. I tried him then, but he held over me, and after that the town chipped in and barred me out. But I'll have him here, curse him! I'll have him here!"

"Looks as though he might be willing to take a shot at him from behind a bush," suggested the sport, in a low tone.

Then, to Grey Burke:

"Who is he, anyway? He must be a dandy, pard."

"He is a dandy. I'm not sayin' he ain't 'way up on style. Genteel Jim they call him, an' I never heerd any other name fur him."

"Neither did I; but that's good enough. I've heard of him myself, and if you mean to fool around him, I'm sorry to say, my friend, it will be like monkeying with a buzz saw or a dynamite bomb."

"Yes, yes; I know. Curse his handsome, smiling face, and his smooth, easy ways!"

"Especially with the trigger."

"Yes yes. He drew and plugged afore Danny could get his hammer down an' Dan a holdin' ther drop all ther time! Ah! hyar he comes now!"

Something like a shout arose from the men outside, and Burke hurried through the door.

"If Genteel Jim is really on the hearse I suspect we are going to see an interesting time," remarked the sport, as he and his friends filed out to watch the arrival of the stage.

The vehicle was in sight, and came jogging along in a way that accounted for its now being rather more behind time than usual.

Nevertheless, it drew up in front of the Eureka with something of its ordinary flourish.

"Hello, Johnny!" shouted Gibson, the landlord, as he hurried out.

"What's the matter? You're behind time? Road-agents?"

"Road-agents, nothin'! They won't tackle this outfit, an' don't you furgit it."

"What was it, then? Sick horse?"

"No. S'uthin's wrong with that dad-blasted wheel. Hev' ter hev' it fixed or borry another afore we kin leave."

A glance at the wheel in question, toward which Johnny had given a jerk of his whip hand, showed there was something wrong, for it looked very wobbly, and gave signs of an early collapse.

"Nice thing ter start a load out with," muttered one of the bystanders, as Gibson threw open the door.

"Stage stops here for supper," continued the landlord.

"Got an hour in Box Elder. Can't go on again till the hearse is fixed. Only hotel in town."

Everybody always did get out at the Eureka, but Gibson never neglected the formula, though by so doing he generally hindered the movement.

To-day he was treated to something like a surprise.

When the coach had halted a natty-looking young fellow was seated by the side of the driver.

He was well dressed and appeared perfectly at his ease, but he took in the whole street with his quick, piercing glance, even to every face among the loungers, who stood across the road in front of the saloon.

He heard the colloquy between Johnny and the landlord without appearing to listen to it, and sprang lightly down as Gibson turned away.

"If you please," he said, with a graceful sweep of his elbow and though he appeared to put no more strength into it than if he was brushing back a butterfly, the somewhat ponderous landlord felt himself actually swept away from before the stage door.

"Now, then, Mr. Vallance, let me help you out. Here, you ought to know the step by this time. That's it. Now, your daughter. That's it. Right as a trivet. I've never been here, but from what they

told me you'll find the Eureka all right. Attend to the rest, Gibson."

The speaker was the all-around sport known as Genteel Jim.

Mr. Vallance, whom he had first aided to descend from the stage, was a tall, pale man, with an Eastern air, and dressed in a suit which had once been nobbish, perhaps, but now shiny from wear.

But the reason why Genteel Jim treated him with so much attention was evident as he stepped to the ground. He had an uncertainty of movement only shown in a strange place by one who is blind.

Following him, however, was a young lady, and the grateful glance she cast upon the sport who had so kindly aided her father should have been a good and sufficient reward for his action, if he had seen it.

The young lady was not so much handsome as pretty in both face and figure, and as she took her father's hand to lead him into the Eureka, Box Elder felt like taking off its hat in respectful admiration.

The dandy sport was not paying any further attention to the pair, and it was evident that he was in no haste to thrust himself upon them.

So far on the trip he had hardly spoken a word to the young lady and he did so only as he helped her to dismount. He had simply seen that the old gentleman needed an assistance which might overtax her strength in case of a slip, and had acted accordingly. As for general conversation, he confined himself exclusively to Uncle Johnny, the driver.

Now he turned carelessly away, and looked over the shoulders of the men gathered around the obnoxious wheel.

"Bad case of dish," he remarked, casually; "but in these altitudes a loose tire is the least you can expect. If we don't go over the rocks before we get to Doghole we'll be good and lucky."

"Reckon we'll have to stay here over night," growled one of the passengers, who had followed Miss Vallance out of the coach, and whose first movement was to take a look at the trouble.

"From the looks of things we might be left in a heap sight worse place. If we do, bet your bottom dollar that I make expenses, and you might improve the occasion by organizing a new stock company. I don't suppose they could bite very hard, but when you scoop a town for all it is worth you have no call to grumble if the pile ain't a big one."

"Much obliged for the hint, but I'll leave that for Bangs to do. It's more in his line."

The traveler spoke with a grim smile as he looked up into the face of a fat man with an irascible cast of countenance, and who was that same Bangs.

"Oh, drop that nonsense!" growled the latter. "There's more money to be made on the square at Doghole. Let's see what the inside of the Eureka looks like."

He thrust his arm through that of his tall fellow traveler and led him away, while, at the same time, Genteel Jim wheeled, and, facing a man who had stolen up behind him, exclaimed:

"Now, then, Grey Burke, what's the matter with you?"

CHAPTER II.

NOT GOOD.

In that indefinable way in which a man learns to reason who carries his life in his hand, Genteel Jim had made out long ago that there was something more of interest to the loungers over at the saloon than the mere arrival of the coach.

In the same way he had connected himself with it, and had been on his guard, careless though he seemed.

As it was, he anticipated Grey Burke by the fraction of a second, for he was only opening his mouth to speak when Jim called him down.

It was none too soon, either.

There was a scowl on Burke's heavy face, and in his hand he held his revolver. No doubt he intended to give warning before he pulled trigger; but, all the same, he had the advantage and meant to keep it.

The sudden movement disconcerted the

fellow, who tried in vain to look straight into the fearless eyes which met his.

"I don't know that you would shoot a man down from behind yet. But, Burke, if this thing keeps on, I wouldn't trust you much longer; and if you keep rubbing it in the time may come when I will have to wipe you out. I don't feel as though it had got here yet, however."

"You'd better think it has, for I mean ter kill you."

Burke was as cool as the sport, but he spoke after an entirely different fashion. There was a dangerous clang in his voice which Genteel Jim recognized, but only smiled at.

"All right. Sail ahead. I'll let you down as easy as I know how. You are an honest sort of a fool, and I never saw how it came you could stay with the pard you set so much store by."

At mention of his pard Burke lost the coolness he had been fighting to maintain. His face became ghastly, and the Box Elder sport, who had followed him across the street, expected to see his pistol hand fly up.

"Don't you name him. I orter shoot you down without a chance, same way ez you downed poor Danny, but I'll play you fair once more. Draw ye'r gun afore I get yer lined!"

A smile curled the lips of the Genteel Sport as he heard the accusation of foul play in the past, but he made no effort to contradict the charge.

He might have made a very fair defense, so far as the bystanders were concerned, but he knew it would do no good with Grey Burke, who had fixed his ideas too firmly to allow them to be moved by reason.

"Don't worry about my gun, little one, but get down to your work. The sooner we have it over the better. I reckon supper's about ready, and I want to get a chance at the first table."

All the time the sport gazed fixedly in the face of the half-mad man, and was insensibly but certainly drawing nearer to him.

"You will hev' it! Fair warnin'!"

As he spoke Burke raised his pistol, but at the same instant, Jim gave an astonishing leap, and, catching the wrist of the man with his left hand, around h's waist he threw his right arm.

Then there was the quick report of the pistol, and the jingle of glass breaking in a front window of the Eureka, followed by a woman's cry of alarm; but the struggle between the two was short and scarcely desperate.

Burke had evidently expected it was to be a shooting match, and was entirely unprepared for that leopard-like spring. He was much the bigger man, with the muscles of an athlete, and his years were not enough to hurt him; but, taken as he was, with a brain none too clear, he was a child in the hands of this steel-muscled man.

Up in the air he went, and down he came with a crash, while the little sport added his whole weight to the force of the fall.

This might not seem so much, but Genteel Jim knew how to make the most of it, as well as of everything else. As his knees went boring into the chest of Grey Burke, the breath appeared to leave it, and for the time being the would-be avenger was senseless.

Jim at once picked up the revolver which had fallen from Burke's nerveless fingers and extracted the cartridges before throwing it down again.

"I suppose I'll have to do for him some day, but I've played as light, so far, as I could, and there's a chance he'll learn sense."

With something like a sigh he spoke, as he turned away and entered the Eureka, meeting Gibson in the hall.

"I think I heard a window smash. If I did, charge it up to me in the bill. I suppose it was my fault. If I had held still the lead wouldn't have flown high."

"That's all right. When the boys begin to hold the street I'm only too thankful if they don't cave in ther whole side

of the buildin'. But how about the young lady?"

"What! Is she hurt?"

"Nothing serious. Scratch, that most like was done by the broken glass; but if there's goin' ter be much of this I'll be takin' a hand myself. Can't afford ter drive away custom."

"Don't worry yourself about that. The frolic is over for the present, though no doubt Burke will pick his flint and try it again on a new line."

"Just so he don't try it here."

"Oh, he'll be apt to go on to the next town before he comes at me. They might give him a hemp tie if he downed me now, and he wants some show for his life."

The landlord seemed satisfied, for his inspection of the sport assured him there would be little danger of his giving any trouble in the house, while, as he said, Grey Burke would not be apt to attack him again on the same ground.

As for the rights of the feud, he cared nothing about them. Such little troubles frequently arose, and his plan was to let the parties settle them between themselves so long as they respected his windows.

Genteel Jim washed the alkali from his face, spruced up his general appearance, and threw himself down in a chair.

He had not long to wait until supper was announced, and the danger he had been in did not interfere at all with his appetite.

When he strolled out from the dining-room he found the cargo was booked to remain there for the night, as he had feared.

It was already late, and it would be impossible to get away before morning.

He was not greatly dissatisfied, though he noticed his fellow-passengers were all disposed to growl over the infliction.

"After all, you will find it is not a half-bad thing," remarked one of the men of Box Elder, the resident sport who had chaffed Grey Burke while the latter was waiting for the arrival of the coach.

"If you are going on to Doghole, I'd sooner make the run by daylight. There's some mighty bad spots in the road for a breakdown, and if they tried to rush things they wouldn't get the old hearse more than half way reliable."

"I generally take things right as they come along, and I guess you won't hear me squeal if we have to stay here a week."

"No?"

"Fact. One camp is about like another camp until it is played out, and there's nothing driving me that I want to risk my precious neck to get to Doghole."

"That's lucky; but if you had been wise you'd have used a thing with a hole in it this afternoon. That galoot is after you bad."

"Yes, he seems to be; though, true as gospel, it ought to be just the other way."

"He has it in for you hot. I had some talk with him before the old box came in, and felt like warning you when you got out."

"Thanks. Lots more have been saying the same thing. But I'm here yet."

"Well, look out. He hasn't given it up yet. He said something about trying a shot-gun the next time."

"I'll chance it, though, thanks all the same for the warning."

For some time Jim loitered about the Eureka, and it was only when the evening had fairly set in, and things promised to be well under way, that he set out to view the town.

As Box Elder was never noted for its street illumination, the greater part of the town was in darkness. Around the saloons, of which there were quite a number, it was brighter, and, judging by them, it was possible the village was still in a fairly prosperous condition.

Without any hesitation the little sport entered the place just opposite to the Eureka Hotel and proceeded to make himself entirely at home.

Burke had remained in a state of semi-unconsciousness until Jim had entered the Eureka, then he staggered to his feet and glared around in a dazed manner, which only provoked a laugh.

For a man who had been bested under such circumstances the crowd had no sympathy.

"Where—where is he?" he growled, feeling at his empty belt.

"See hyar, my man," warned Buck Lane, a representative chief in Box Elder, "your man, as you call him, is all right. You've had your chance and missed the turn. If you want another hitch at him get him down to Doghole, where they let you take a sitting shot at a man if you give him notice beforehand. Such things don't go hyar, and if you try it on we'll hang you. Sabbe?"

"He killed Danny," mumbled Burke, still all abroad.

"If he did it was because he had to. We can tell that by the way he let you off. Now, then, if you can't keep the peace, jump the camp, and do it mighty sudden, or the boys will run you out."

It took a man of some nerve to talk that way to Grey Burke, unarmed though he was, but Buck Lane had the sand, and Grey Burke knew it.

"That's all right. He's goin' ter Doghole, an' I'll be thar' too. I'll tend ter him first, an' then—then I'll come back and settle with you. I can't git drawn into any side games till I square it on account ov poor old Dan."

The man was not cowed, but turned suddenly away and left the spot.

A little later he had mounted his cayuse and was going out of Box Elder by the Doghole trail.

There was a valise strapped behind his saddle, and when he had got fairly out of sight from the town he dismounted, tethered his horse, and quietly began to make some changes in his appearance which soon caused him to look like quite a different person.

CHAPTER III.

"TRY, TRY AGAIN."

Grey Burke was very much in earnest and did not intend to give up his intention of pushing the feud with Genteel Jim to the bitter end.

At the same time he understood that after the fiasco of the afternoon and the warning he had received, it might not be well for him to assault the little sport within the borders of Box Elder.

In case the matter had a fatal ending, as he intended it should, it would look too much like murder to those who seemed prejudiced in favor of the sport.

If the worst came to the worst he intended to go on to Doghole and wait for him there, but at the same time he decided to make one more effort here and to save himself from immediate results.

He did not intend to re-enter Box Elder until the excitement had thoroughly disappeared, and suspicion would not be so ready to mark him in his disguise.

If the stage went out that evening he would see it pass, and regulate himself accordingly.

If it did not, he felt sure he would be able to find Genteel Jim in one of the saloons of which the town boasted.

While he was sitting with his face buried in his hands, thinking over what was to come, he heard a footstep approaching, and looked up.

It was just near enough to darkness to make the outlines of the intruder indistinct, and yet light enough for him to decide that he was a perfect stranger.

Burke had kept a spare revolver among his luggage, and that already was at his hip, while across his lap lay a double-barreled shot-gun, the locks of which he had just a little before been testing with loving solicitude.

It was not likely this man could be a foe, yet he was wise enough to take no risks, and the muzzle of the shot-gun moved around so as to cover the approaching individual, the hammers went back, and he sharply challenged:

"Steady, thar', stranger. I don't mean yer no harm, but I want ter know who comes. Halt, an' show ye'r hand."

"No nonsense, Burke. It's a friend from way back, and you had better listen."

"Who are you?"

"That's neither here nor there. I just want a little talk."

"How do you want it? Muzzle ter muzzle?"

"No, no. I knew Dan Tinker once upon a time, and a pard of his is a friend of mine."

"You knew Dan?"

"Yes; at Socorro. He was white as they make 'em."

"Put it thar', pard. Put it thar'."

Without hesitation Burke rose up and extended his hand.

The words had convinced him, because he was aware his dead friend had been at Socorro, at one time, and that only some one who had been intimate with him would be aware of the fact. He had flourished there under another name.

The two shook hands.

"I admire your pluck, but I don't think much of your judgment. You'll never get away with Genteel Jim and revenge your old pard flipping at him that way."

"Don't yer believe it. I'll make ther rifle yet."

"Excuse me, but Jim lays over you a bit, and even Tinker was a trifle slow to travel alongside of such a stemwinder."

"It wasn't that—it wasn't that," began Burke, eagerly.

"He war' off his guard, along ov ther gerloot's foolishness, an' dropped afore he got agoin'."

"Just as I am afraid you will, my friend, if you don't mend your ways. You want to shoot first, and do your talking after the funeral, if you ever try it again."

"That's what I'm goin' ter do," said the other, eagerly.

"If I can find him I'll try it on right hyar in Box Elder. I'm gittin' ready fur him now."

"That's business. As near as I can make out you have been putting on some frills that make you look like a different man."

"He'll never know who hit him."

"But Box Elder might. I can't take a hand in myself, and you'll have to do that part yourself, but afterward I might be able to help you, and if you're hard up I'll see that an old friend of Dan Tinker don't suffer for a little coin."

"One man can't do me much good in that crowd if they open up on me, but there's one way you could help a leetle."

"Name it!"

"When I take the trick I'll break for the door. You look after my horse outside till I come and I'll run my chances. If they gather me in, you bet I'll never blow on a pard."

"I'll have it done. I've got a side pard myself that will stand behind us that far, though he wouldn't care to take a bigger hand in it."

"Kin yer rely on him?"

"To the death. Come into town just at nine o'clock, and he will meet you at the turn and tell you where to find the sport. I'll be on hand to see fair play as far as my say so will go."

"Good enough. I know you ain't doin' all of this outer love fur me; but that don't count, and one ov these days if ther chance comes I'll do a good turn fur you."

"Never mind. Keep quiet about what I have said, and it will be grist to your mill. So long."

"Wonder who he is," thought Burke, as the stranger turned away, and began to retrace his steps toward Box Elder.

"Must hev' been one ov the pilgrims ez kim in on the hearse. Never mind, though. He has it in fur ther Genteel Sport savage ez a wolf. He said I should be around at nine o'clock, and I'll be thar'."

As for the stranger, he was shrugging his broad shoulders and thinking much the same thing.

"Just you do the good turn for me tonight, and I'll let you off from the rest of the promise. I may be wrong, but it strikes me the sport will be very much in my way if I don't have him removed, and Grey Burke is as good a means as any. Lucky I struck Curly. He is just the sort for a back-stop in a game like this."

The man scarcely looked like a person to take part in a game such as the two had been discussing, for he was well dressed

and had an air of responsibility about him; but there are some strange anomalies in frontier life, and Hiram Bangs was one of them.

He got back to the Eureka without any one particularly noting his absence, though he made no secret about his coming. He strolled along through the town slowly, and appeared to be observing closely everything which might be a matter of interest to a capitalist who had money to invest in a likely opening.

There had been still another passenger on the coach, a tall, bony man, with a long, solemn face, who nodded to the other when he returned, and said nothing.

Evidently he knew nothing of the errand, and only seemed interested in the fact that they were booked for a stay over night on this side of the mountains.

"Not much of a town, Andy. Looks as though everything had petered out and the men were running things on their nerve. Don't like the lay of the ground, anyhow. About all they can do here is to watch the hearse come in and lay low for victims."

"I could have told you that. I put some money here once, and got out of it on the dead even, so it's not my time to grumble. I wouldn't put another dollar here, though."

"Reckon their sports are as hard up as their miners, but it won't hurt to explore a little. What do you say to going along?"

"Thankee, no. I'll bunk in. Let me know if you pull off a fortune."

It was almost nine o'clock when the two separated, but just at that time Genteel Jim was drifting into the Bar None Saloon.

He did not think much of Box Elder, since, as has already been intimated, the town was in its decadence, and needed no one to inform him that the chance of winning a good stake was small.

But, as yet, there were men enough to visit the saloons of an evening and make things mildly interesting, though they were largely of a rougher sort than the genteel sport usually came in contact with from choice.

Not that he hesitated at meeting a crowd because it was tough.

He had held his own too long to care what sort came his way, but as he found no money or pleasure in that sort, he had learned to move among them, though not of them.

Every man in the saloon knew he was one of the passengers held over by the trouble with the coach, and probably all had either heard of, or seen, his little affair with Grey Burke. From the moment of his entrance he was a sort of chief.

In ten minutes he had spoken to every man in the room, and in fifteen was seated with Buck Lane and a couple of others, and the cards were dropping around to decide whose was the deal.

No faro game was running, and there seemed positively no other way for him to pass the evening.

There was nothing thrilling about this game as it started out, for there was a low limit, and the antagonists talked together in high good humor.

In the midst of it a man who seemed to be a stranger to Box Elder came slouching up to the bar, and in a deprecating way called for rum.

CHAPTER IV.

GREY BURKE'S GRATITUDE.

Genteel Jim was always on the lookout, and as the stranger took his stand the sport gave him a short, keen look, and then went on with the game.

He had not forgotten Grey Burke, but never connected this shrinking old man with the sturdy young fellow who had been seeking his life, and who, he had been assured, had jumped the camp after his failure.

The side of the man's face was toward him, and was partly hidden by long, straight locks of grizzled hair.

"Going to be a circus of some kind," thought the sport, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Can tell that by the back of his neck. Perhaps he's only scared; but that's a blamed bad complaint in a crowd like this."

If they get on to it the music will be apt to strike up."

He kept his thoughts to himself, and they did not interfere with his game, for he ran off the cards with all his expert grace, and watched the other players as keenly as though there was a thousand up instead of a ten-dollar limit.

He was right in regard to the circus.

Though the man seemed to be nervously anxious to keep out of the way, and avoid attention, he was spotted the moment he entered by some of the roughs who were pining for amusement, and had nothing better to engage their attention.

"Hello!" exclaimed one, striding to his side, and bringing his hand down on the old man's shoulder with a resounding whack.

"Hyar's old Merthuserley tryin' ter drink alone. What shall be done with him?"

"Shoot him! He's lived too long ef he's learned sich manners."

"Hang him!"

"Make him turn on ther tap fur ther ranch."

"Hyar, old man, drap et tell ther court decides. Sich things don't go at Box Elder."

So far there was nothing in it all but a little rough play. At the Bar None it was not a capital crime for a man to drink alone, even if he was a stranger.

But the last order was too much for the lone drinker, who seemed to fear he might lose the drink for which he had already shovved over a solitary coin.

He tipped the decanter higher, in desperate haste, overrunning the glass, which he snatched up with both hands and carried to his lips.

The liquor was none of the best, and it went down like a torchlight procession on a dead run. Such superhuman industry in getting away with tanglefoot had never before been seen at that bar, and the half dozen roughs who had crowded around watched him with an amused grin.

It was as good as a show, and was not costing them a cent.

"Gosh! but ye'r dry, ole man. Let's see ef you kin do it ag'in."

As he spoke the fellow poured out another brimming tumbler and extended it toward the intended victim.

But though the liquor had gone down without a wink, some of it appeared to stick crossways.

The stranger began to cough and to sputter.

There was really no artifice about it, and his whole frame was convulsed. He grew black in the face, and was like a rag in the hands of his tormentors.

They did not sympathize, even a little bit.

"Hyar's ye'r gruel. Stan' up to ther rack an' take it down!" shouted the chief of his tormentors.

"Hold stiddy, thar'. One ov yer just put ther clamps on his nose tell he opens his mouth, an' we'll pour it down."

The victim was recovering a little, and his wits were enough about him to take in this last proposition. With a sudden twist he wrenched himself loose.

There was a strength in the movement which took the crowd by surprise, and perhaps it was an unfortunate thing, for it seemed to justify a little rougher work than had been contemplated. The old man was good for a tussle, and since the ball had started to rolling there was no telling where it would stop.

"Down him! Down him! Don't let him git away."

Once more the crowd closed in, laughing, shouting, but dangerous all the same, and the whole mob swayed over toward the table at which the stranger sport and his newly-made friends were working at their little game of draw.

"Hi, there!" shouted Genteel Jim.

"Half a dozen to one is no fair. Give the old man a chance, and I've dollars that says he can get away with the best of you."

"You hear him? I'm dead beat, an' busted, but ef it's fun ye'r after I kin jest give ye heaps ov that. One at a time I kin flop over ther best men yer hev' in

Box Elder, ter say nothin' ov ther low down, 'ornery fistes ther hey' bi'n playin' roots on ther old man."

The stranger spit on his hands, and brought them together with a defiant slap. The words of the sport woke him up for the first time, and he began to show his mettle.

The trouble was, he went a little too far. The whisky he had drunk made him over confident, or he was ripe for a row, anyhow.

As he spoke he suddenly caught the nearest man and slung him against his companions in such a way that three or four of them staggered back and came near to going down in a heap.

At that there was an angry growl, and without considering the proposition to come one at a time, they rushed at him in a body.

Then the stranger gave a quick side spring himself, and out came his revolver, while he gave a single, swift glance at the open door.

Genteel Jim had not thought of mixing in the affair; and if he had spoken a word or two for fair play, it was just a part of the freshness which was everlastingly involving him in matters with which he had no concern.

He knew, though, that there was a chance his interference might be resented, and he had better keep his eyes open accordingly.

If the men from Box Elder had turned against him they would have found him ready.

What he was not ready for was the sudden movement of the stranger, whose hand shot up to a level, while the muzzle of his weapon pointed straight at Genteel Jim.

It hung that way for a second; and in that brief period of time the Genteel Sport had the wit and coolness to take in the situation, and brace himself for the coming shot.

Then down came the hammer.
Nothing followed but a sharp click.

It might not happen again in a thousand times, but a bad cartridge was the salvation of the sport, who, as the hammer fell, leaped forward.

"Steady, there!" he shouted; "that makes him my meat!"

In the moment of danger he had seen through the plot and penetrated the disguise.

There had only been time for the one effort, for, a second later, the revolver was sent spinning away, while two or three weapons appeared as if by magic, and were trained on the stranger, as to the most of them all he still seemed to be.

But with a swift spring, the sport bounded past them all, and making a quick snatch, tore the shock of hair from the seeming stranger, and revealed the face of Grey Burke.

Disarmed once more, and with his wig gone, Burke straightened himself and stood staring into the face of the man who had unmasked him.

"Failed once more! But I'll hev' yer yet!" he shouted, and then, with an unexpected wheel, he threw himself upon the men who were crowding on his rear, and, tumbling them this way and that, shot out of the door. An instant later they could hear the strokes of his horse's hoofs as he stretched away in a tearing gallop.

"Sold again," remarked Jim, coolly, throwing down the wig, and removing his other hand from the derringer upon which it had been resting.

"I couldn't shoot him in the back, don't you know, but the laugh is on me. Let's liquor."

CHAPTER V.

A CASE FOR A GOOD SAMARITAN.

"Pluck is good, and judgment is worth a good deal; but luck is better than either," was about the only further comment the sport made on the daring and almost successful attempt of Grey Burke.

This time he was sure he was rid of the man for a while, and he had steadfastly decided that when out of sight the avenger, if so he might be called, should be out of mind.

The balance of the evening slipped around without any adventure, the bout at draw turned out to be only a summer game, for amusement simply, and he was asleep at the Eureka earlier than usual.

Under such circumstances it was not strange that he should be out of bed among the first, and out taking a whiff of the fresh morning air to get an appetite for the breakfast which was not as yet ready.

As he took a turn at the edge of the town, and moved out of view from the Eureka, he came face to face with one of his fellow passengers, who was up even earlier than he.

Though Genteel Jim had troubled himself little about the inside cargo, the driver had spoken of it in a desultory way; and this man he had heard of by name long before he came drifting this way in search of spoils.

He was tall, and lank, and had altogether a cold-hearted appearance, but those who knew him best said that though he was a speculator from the ground up, and never demonstrative about his feelings, he was a good man to tie to, and in a silent way had done about as much good to the world at large as many who made more pretense.

He nodded to the sport, and made a little movement which showed he had some intention of speaking.

"Morning, Reever. Might have found worse quarters than the Eureka, but guess you ain't sorry we'll be on the way in an hour or so."

"Right you are, and yet—I don't know. If I had my way I'm not sure but what I'd be on the back track."

"There's my percentage—I haven't any."

Jim spoke with a laugh, but he could not help noticing that Reever was peculiarly low spirited.

"Perhaps I won't go back myself," continued the tall speculator.

"I feel as though I wouldn't, and things generally turn out as I feel."

"Better get a brace on, old man, or you'll be down with mountain fever. That's about the way it generally takes 'em."

"Lead fever, more likely. I feel just like I did the morning before Bad Gene dropped me on account of the Black Jacket claim. I rustled through them, but I don't know that I could do it again."

"There's something in that," said the sport, stroking his cheek slowly.

"I've felt that way myself; but as they are usually cracking away at me, perhaps that's no sign. Keep an eye out, and when you find out who the other fellow is, shoot first."

"That don't seem to be your plan."

"Oh, I'm banking on my luck; and when that runs out it's time for me to go. This sort of life ain't so very engaging that one wants it to last forever. I suppose that's the advantage we have in the game."

"Yes. I've felt that way myself—before I made a pile."

"Better feel that way again. The pile will do you more good."

Reever pulled himself together.

"Perhaps I had; but I didn't start out to talk about these things. Has Bangs anything against you?"

"Not that I know of. I never had the pleasure of running against his supreme highness before, and, so far, I don't see that I've done anything worse than take the place of honor, on top of the hearse. Why?"

"The idea struck me when he came in last night. Are you a prudent man with your mouth?"

"That depends. I never gave away a man who was banking on the chance; but I'm not particular how I take my own part."

"Then, between us, I don't know much about Bangs, though he has been trying to get me into a bit of speculation; but the more I know the less I like him."

"If I'm not mistaken, he's going to go against that pair who are with us; and he won't be particular how he does it. I promised to see they had fair play, and if I got frozen out I thought you might be

willing to chip in. There will be coin in it, and a heap sight of mercy, besides."

"They look as though they might need it; and Bangs looks as though he might be a bad man to run against, but if it comes in my way I wouldn't mind giving him a whirl. Poor lambs! They ought to have a guardian."

"They've got one," retorted Reever, with a short laugh.

"Self appointed and good as far as she goes."

"Hannah, eh?"

"That's the article. I can see she is keeping an eye out for the lamb, and she may be able to steer her through the thorns, but they don't take much stock in her yet; and the time may come when it will take more than a woman's sharp tongue to stand between them and trouble. They are going down to claim a mine which Bangs has an eye on; from what I see of him he will be willing to get them out of the road."

"How?"

"Fair means or foul. If there's money in it he'll take the mine with the girl or without it."

"And what's this got to do with me?"

"You tell. Perhaps Hiram thinks you are going to chip if you are at the table with the game, and would as soon you were out of it for good."

"And chip I will if I see him try to spring the cards."

"All right. Go a little slow. There's some sort of a complication you had better get the rights of; but it don't affect the two. As I take it they are dead on the square, and Bangs has no business with them."

"I'm not the sort to be too far to the front till the pinch comes, but I'll stand behind them."

"That's enough. I have no interest in them that has coin in it; but now and then one wants to do a good thing for fun. If I loose my grip there's no man I'd sooner turn it over to than you."

"Thanks. I've generally a full stock of my own troubles, but there's always room to take on a few of somebody else's, and if Grey Burke don't get away with me I'll give Hiram the option if it seems to be the square thing."

The conversation did not last long, and they separated with only a nod, but the face of Andy Reever was brighter when he reached the Eureka; and he gave no hint of a speaking acquaintance with the sport when Genteel Jim arrived there a short time after from a different direction.

There had been some trouble about finding the only man who could fix the wheel, but he completed his work at last, and by the time the passengers had finished breakfast the vehicle was at the door ready to start.

Everything seemed in good shape, and there was no fear of further accident with the passengers as they loaded themselves back in their old positions. Uncle Johnny cracked his whip, and once more the outfit was under way.

"Just as soon do the rest of the turn by daylight, eh, Johnny?"

Jim and the driver had lit cigars, and were enjoying the morning air.

"You bet!"

"But the company will be apt to make a kick on that hole in the schedule," remarked the sport.

"Company be hanged. This are my last trip, aryhow."

"No danger from agents?"

"Dun'no'. Tulip kep' gate along hyar fur some time, an' then they thought they hung him an' his gang at Doghole; but they do say they b'in seen ag'in. They ain't held me up latterly."

"So there's a chance, is there?"

"A dog-gone good chance, with two men aboard like Hi Bangs an' Andy Reever. But I guess we're safe tell we cl'r ther summit."

The rate of progress was slow after this for some time, but at length the summit was reached, and Johnny threw on the brake.

And right there the real dangers of the trip began.

CHAPTER VI.

A BAD BREAK.

For a moment or so the stage rolled slowly down the gradually steepening mountain trail.

Then it moved faster, and soon was racking along, sometimes one wheel on the ground, sometimes two, but seldom more.

The brake broke just after mounting the "hog-back," and when Uncle Johnny kicked the beam over it refused to hold.

After that there was only one thing to do, and that was to keep the horses on their feet, and ahead of the hearse.

At first Johnny held his teams well in hand, and the passengers were not aware anything was wrong; but Genteel Jim, who quietly kept an eye on the driver, had his suspicions.

When the veteran grew white, even behind the ears, it was fair to guess something was out of gear, and that danger was in front.

"It's the devil's own turn, Johnny, and I have my doubts," whispered Jim, bending forward.

"You bet!"

"And they're off for good?"

"Kin yer see?"

"Well, there's a woman inside it would be a pity to spill, and if you're not dead sure about your nerve, better let me take the ribbons."

"Ketch hold, pardner. I'll look fur a soft place ter jump. Yer see, I've lost my grip, an' ain't good ter tool 'em furder, an' they know it. I've a woman an' three kids waitin' fur me at ther end ov ther road, an' this war' my last trip."

Perhaps that was what unnerved him, for the old man had looked death in the face more than once—as every one knew—and never squealed. He made a motion with his hands, and before they knew how it was done, Jim was holding on to the ribbons for dear life, but just as cool as though he was back at Irve Nathan's saloon, with a tenderfoot in tow, and was tossing around for deal.

The coach went faster and faster, and before long the passengers inside were up to the situation.

Once fairly away, and it looked as though there was no chance for salvation; while to meet another team on the long rise meant sudden death.

On the left-hand side the precipice went down sheer a thousand feet, while on the right it rose as perpendicularly, while the track itself was barely wide enough to hold the flying wheels.

"Toot your horn, Johnny!" shouted the sport, as they plunged forward still more rapidly.

"It may save us—or somebody else."

Here and there was a niche gouged out of the mountain side, which would barely hold a coach and team. There was a possibility of two outfits meeting on the "Flume," and these turn-outs were the only chances for passing.

Shouts arose from the inside, and nervous hands began to work at the doors of the coach, which at last flew open.

Jim managed to hear the sound above the rattle of the wheels.

"Hold hard, inside!" he shouted.

"This way there's a good chance; but if you jump it's certain death. Stick to the hearse, Johnny. I'll take you through all right, or you'll die like a hero."

Johnny didn't want to die at all, but he was not yet ready to jump, and had too much nerve to go crawling down over the hind boot. Now the reins were out of his hands he was willing to hang on till the last minute, and shook his head while he kept his horn sounding.

Inside the noise redoubled.

Andy Reever had in his time told some wonderful yarns as to how his courage had been tried and never found wanting, but he made rather more noise than all the rest put together, while Bangs was a good second. Hannah Dunlop, the sour-faced, elderly woman, screamed for ten seconds and prayed for twenty, alternately.

Dora Vallance made no noise at all, but with hands tightly clenched together waited the result in silence; while her father sat bolt upright, turning his head neither to the left nor the right.

The turn in the road, which Genteel Jim feared worst of all, was close at hand, and he saw the leaders slackening their pace of their own accord. They were not wild as yet, and he had been keeping them going, so the traces remained straight, without allowing them to pull a pound.

The whip had never reached them so far, but now he flung out the long lash gently. Again they stretched out, but this time was with a nervousness which Jim was not slow to notice.

"Steady, beauties! You can't save anything by kicking over the traces, and we'll get there soon enough if you let me do the headwork. Here you are."

The curve was right at hand, and he took a steady pull on the off leader.

It answered to the touch, darted to the right, followed by the swing and wheel horses, the coach swung around with a crash and a groan, two wheels spinning in the air, two dragging on the ground, wrenching, sliding, swaying, creaking, and it seemed fully half of the body of the vehicle swung out over the abyss.

Then three wheels were on the flinty road; and then four. The turn had been made, and the speed slackened a trifle, while the road in front was straight, and broadening as it went down.

Nevertheless, it was a perilous journey that remained, and one which tested both nerve and muscle. Even Genteel Jim's steel-like tendons ached with the strain before the pace slackened under his mighty pull, and the six horses were at last galloping steadily along the almost level road.

"Catch hold, Johnny! The fun's all over, now, and the rest is steady business."

With a sigh of relief Genteel Jim surrendered the reins, thanking his lucky stars he had got through one more close call. He was inclined to smile when he heard the shout of some one inside:

"Hold on, driver! Hold on!"

"I'm a holdin'," growled Johnny, tugging at the lines as hard as ever.

"Ef I let go I reckon they'd land yer all in kingdom come, yit!"

"But stop! stop! There's a passenger missing! It's the young lady!"

The doors were still banging against the sides of the coach, and it was not hard to believe that some one had either sprung or been pitched out. The wonder was, more of the load had not been lost. Johnny's pull became steadier and stronger, and within the distance of a few hundred yards the horses were checked altogether.

"Now, what's all this about?" asked the driver, leaning over and looking down, as several passengers leaped from the conveyance the moment it came to a standstill.

"My daughter!" exclaimed Zebulon Vallance.

"She fell from the stage when it rounded the bend up there, and I am afraid she is dead."

Uncle Johnny swore under his breath, for it was not in the nature of man that he should remain strictly plios in the face of such an accident, but Genteel Jim sprang off the coach at once.

"Back, then, and see! Johnny, stay here till we come again. And, Johnny, don't you move!"

He touched his belt as he spoke, and the driver shook his head. When the handsome little sport talked that way he meant all he said.

It was useless to think of driving back; the search, of course, had to be made on foot. Every man about the vehicle, except the driver, followed, though in the start there were plenty of weak knees in the party, which had not yet had time to get over the rapid journey down the Devil's Flume.

The turn was reached, and they began to look around with anxious eyes; but no sign was there of Miss Vallance, save a crumpled bit of millinery, which lay by the side of the trail.

"There was no trace of blood, either, or mark where she might have fallen by the wayside. It looked as though, if she had

left the coach at that point, she had been flung clear over the precipice.

Jim advanced to the edge and looked over, scanning narrowly every rock and projection which might have caught her.

He turned back with something like a shiver.

"Ough! I'm sorry to say it, but it looks as though she had taken the drop. If so, her own mother wouldn't know the body."

"Tell me not so! Oh, tell me not so!" quavered the father, who was sharper eared and nearer than the sport had thought.

"Surely she cannot be dead. Let us go down and see. Perhaps she is only stunned!"

"Sorry you heard me, old gentleman, for the truth is bitter. As for getting down, it can't be done from this place, and I'm not sure about any other, unless you have more ropes and men than you will find this side of Doghole City. I know a thing when I see it, and I give it to you straight."

"Leave me here, then, and return with help when you can. I will pay all."

CHAPTER VII.

THE COMPLIMENTS OF GREY BURKE.

The distance to Doghole was not great, and the trail was plain and good, save for the fact that a large proportion of it was over rising ground. Long enough before the coach could have got over the low divide the speed of the horses would have been checked had they tried to keep up the gait at which they came down the Flume.

Genteel Jim hurried back to the stage, and the most of the passengers went with him.

They spoke in whispers as they went along, and there was a shadow on faces which were almost proof against such a thing.

Almost, but not quite.

The ride down the track of deadly danger had been a storage battery of shocks, and the reaction following left them in just the right condition to be affected by an accident which in the excitement had scarcely been noticed.

"Only hope the old gent won't get to prowling around, trying to get over those rocks," muttered Jim.

"I'm as good for such things as the next, but trying to turn the trick would kill me."

"No danger of his doin' that, young man," retorted the same sharp voice which had hailed the driver and stopped the coach.

It was the elderly lady who spoke.

"Zebulon Vallance is blind. I wouldn't hev' left him if I had 'a' wanted tew knew what yew saw deown there."

"Blind! Great Scott, there's where the trouble comes in! He tugged at my coat-tail like a pup in leading strings; but turn him loose and he's just crazy enough to go blundering over the brink. Look after him, will you?"

"But his darter?"

"She's down there, right enough, but dead or living is more than I can say. Just had a glimpse of her. No more time for chin. Sooner we get a rope the better. She may not hold on long, but she's stopped halfway."

Uncle Johnny saw the party that came trooping back with a shiver.

The young lady was not with it, nor had the old gentleman come along.

The accident had been as bad as he feared.

"Sorry, old man, but you'll have to let on you ain't looking while I take a leader. You'll never be able to get up the long grade faster than a walk; and just now minutes count. Hitch the odd horse behind, and come on as fast as you can. May have to take the back trip with your go-cart."

While he spoke Jim rapidly stripped the harness off a leader, and before he was done talking was on its back, gathering up the bridle.

"One of you go back and tell the old gent there will be help here in half an hour, and see he don't go prowling 'round. So long."

The tough twig in his hand fell along the flank of the animal, which darted away.

Nor did the stage make long delay, for before he reached the next turn, looking back, the sport saw Johnny gathering up the lines for the start.

"Good enough! Looks as though he had tumbled the trunks out by the roadside, and was coming with a light load. I'll just have things ready by the time he gets in—if this plug can keep up the going."

The plug, as he called him, had no idea of slackening his speed. Genteel Jim had a good knowledge of pace, as he seemed to have of everything else, and he sent the horse along at exactly the gait he thought would last.

The gradual slope, which would have brought the heavy stage down to a pace no faster than a walk was no great obstacle to progress, the horse keeping up its swift gallop, while Jim noted with delight how easily the roadway was slipping back under him.

"Two miles yet to Doghole. Ought to make it in seven minutes. Ah!"

At the crest of the divide the road went between two banks, making right there another sharp turn.

What lay around the bend was almost hidden, but not quite. The sharp eye of the sport had seen a little sign of trouble ahead, though many a man would have suffered it to go unnoticed.

"Barricade, eh! Road-agents, by mighty! Make it uncomfortable for Johnny and his load if I don't talk Spanish to 'em; and I haven't time to tarry. Houp la!"

He struck the horse a stinging blow, and then, holding its head level and straight, dashed around the turn.

The obstruction was there, sure enough, but a little farther away from the top line of the hill than he had thought.

It was no great fortification, but it would have brought the stage to a halt without a doubt. It reached from one side of the cut to the other, and beyond it he could see men lurking, while he caught the shadows of more men in his rear, who rose on the banks as he passed.

"Hands up!" shouted a clear voice.

"Halt!"

With a shout and a rush Genteel Jim went at the barricade.

He gave the horse a touch with the heel, and a lift with the bit, and the animal flew over it like a bird.

At a dozen rods' distance Jim drew in.

A revolver was in his hand, which he held up carelessly. As yet he had not used it once.

"Say, there, you chaps! The hearse had an accident on the Flume, and I'm going for ropes and a sawbones for a woman we lost. Johnny is to take 'em back if it's the best we can do, and we don't want any of this nonsense in his road. You clear away this lumber, and if you monkey with him, I'll hunt you down and shoot your boss myself. You hear me? It's Genteel Jim that's shouting."

He turned away without waiting for answer, but it came, anyhow, in the shape of a shot from a Winchester, which went hissing over his head as he ducked low in his seat. He expected somethin' of the kind, for Captain Tulip shot first and thought about it afterward.

"It was a good straight bluff, and may help Uncle Johnny a heap, if it wins. If it don't, I've got a sweet little contract on my hands. If he knows me at all Tulip knows I always keep my word, and he'll be layin' for me according."

So he was thinking as he dashed down the long incline which led into Doghole, now not more than a mile away and plainly visible.

The fact was, the cheek of Captain Tulip was surprising. The spot where he had planned to have his hold-up was in view from the outskirts of the town. It was a strong chance there would be witnesses of what was going on, and Tulip knew as well as could be that if Doghole had the show it would only be too glad to take a hand in.

As Genteel Jim dashed up to the Silver

Queen Hotel there was a crowd of loungers on the porch.

His appearance in that shape was as good as a shout, for it was patent something desperate had happened, and Jim did not seem the young man to run away from it without reason. The horse was recognized at a glance, and a buzz ran around that the hearse had gone over the side of the Flume.

"Steady, all!" he shouted, as he swung himself off.

"Don't yowl till you get in the crack. Brake broke on the Flume, and we toolled the wagon round the turn and down the hill all right, but there was a little spill."

"Is Bangs dead? Where's the hearse? How about Bangs?"

Half a dozen voices took up the cry.

"Who the trunder is bangs?" exclaimed Jim, facing around.

"There's a woman hanging on the rocks, halfway down, just where you make the big bend, and if we don't get a move on and roust out a lot of ropes and help, she'll be a goner. Take a hustle, some of you, and rack me out a cayuse. I'll be going out again in the shake of a gray ape's tail!"

"Will yer?" growled a deep, savage voice, and out from the Silver Queen stepped a man with a shot-gun, who threw it up as he came, and pulled both triggers one after the other.

"Ha! ha!" shouted the shooter, flourishing his gun as he uttered his ragged, screeching laugh.

"I tolle him when we met ag'in I'd drop him on sight, an' I reckon Grey Burke kin keep his promise!"

It looked as though he had kept it only too well, for Genteel Jim dropped at the word.

But he dropped suspiciously soon, and had not Grey Burke been drinking heavily he might have noted that the sport twitched out a gun as he fell.

"Seven buckshot in each barr'l, an' ef yer looks et ther stiff you'll 'kiver whar' ther 'ull ov 'em went through with one hand."

If the fourteen buckshot had gone where Grey Burke thought he aimed them the sport would have been pretty much in pieces.

Instead of that, the hand of Genteel Jim went up while Burke was in the midst of the war dance, and a pistol cracked shrilly.

"Sorry to hurt you, old man, but there's no time just now for foolishness," laughed Jim, as he sprang to his feet.

"Some of you carry him in and put him to bed. Get the sawbones to fix him up quick, and I'll pay the shot. He'll be 'round in a day or so if blood poison don't set in."

CHAPTER VIII.

A ROPE BREAKS.

Dora Vallance only gave a single low cry when she shot out of the open door from the swaying coach.

How it happened she could not have told.

It seemed one minute she was firmly braced; the next that an irresistible power had seized her and cast her far out into the air.

Were the truth known, it might be that her fall saved the rest, for at that instant the conveyance was trembling, with its two wheels on the left side actually hanging over the abyss.

Her fall was not so far or so hard as it seemed, and though senseless, she was unhurt when she began her slide for life down a steep incline, which, from the top, appeared to be almost perpendicular.

Had she been sensible, had she struggled in the least, the chances were she would have left the path, and pitched forward into space. As it was, she clung to the zigzag chute, and though bruised, and her clothing torn, yet here and there was a check which steadied her, and at last she halted in a crumpled little heap.

Her wits did not return, but she was still breathing.

She was almost concealed from view by a huge boulder which projected above her and which had proved her salvation. It was only the keen eye of Genteel Jim

which sought out and found the gleam of a little corner of her dress.

When he had gone, and the sour-faced, elderly woman had come back and looked over, there was not a trace of it to be seen.

Zebulon Vallance stood just where the sport left him. He appeared to be staring into vacancy, and had any one looked into his eyes they would have been more apt to think he was in a trance than that those orbs were sightless.

For a time he had been there alone, and the returning steps of the woman had not apparently attracted his attention. She took the glance over, and, seeing nothing, returned to him.

"Chirk up, Zebulon. I sh'd opine the young man was in earnest, and he will be back as soon as horseflesh can carry him. I won't say thar' is any hope, but he will do all that can be done, and, thanks for mussy, you and I air still on prayin' grounds. But I did think when that trump wuz a soundin' it wuz the blast of the last one, and I prayed according."

"Your prayers seemed to have been answered for yourself," responded the man, never changing his attitude.

"But why should two old, worm-eaten branches like us be left, and the smooth young sapling broken? It seems hard, very hard, and I am not yet reconciled; but the ways of Providence are dark and mysterious. It may be for the best, but my poor, weak eyes cannot see it."

The woman gave a sniff and a snort.

"In course they can't. They don't see anything. They didn't even see the wolf that was edgin' up to the lamb. I was watching, but, la, sakes! what good could I do? And now death steps in betwixt them."

"What do you mean, woman?"

"Woman yourself. I am as much of a lady as anybody, and I only meant to talk for your own good. It's only a blind man that would let Hiram Bangs raven around his sheepfold. I g've you fair warnin' now, whether it's good for anything or not, and right glad am I that it does not come tew late. Better for her to have gone over the rocks tew death than tew him."

In her excitement the woman dropped some of the peculiarities of speech which sometimes appeared in her conversation.

"He is a wolf, a thief, a traitor, a murderer! One day or other his sins will find him out, and I do not care how soon."

"You know him?"

"I know of him, and that is enough. When I believed we were going straight down to perdition, I thought it was his weight was carrying us, but I was wrong. The devil looked after his own, and it was his wickednes that saved us. Oh, tew think I should meet him here, and not have the courage to rid the world of such a monster! Oh, dear, what am I saying?"

She plumped down on her knees in the middle of the road, and covered her face with her hands, leaving the blind man much perplexed.

The sound of a footstep did not arouse her, but a new-comer was at hand.

He was a well-built man, with a heavy beard, and dressed in the garb of a miner who had put on his best clothes to go out on a Sunday spree.

A belt about his waist supported a brace of long-barreled navy revolvers and a huge bowie, while in his hand he carried a Winchester.

He looked at the pair suspiciously, his hand on the hammer of his rifle, and then peered around as if in search of others. It was possible he had been listening, for in their interest in the conversation the outside world was not looked after.

The face of Zebulon Vallance was turned directly toward this intruder, yet he did not heed him, and it rather seemed as though his eyesight went through and through, to take in something far beyond.

"Had somethin' of an accident hyar, did yer?"

At the question Vallance started, while Hannah sprang up, shouting:

"Mussy sakes! Who be yew?"

"Captain Tulip, at ye'r service. I hed laid out a leetle bit of business with that same hearse, but Genteel Jim give me a

hint to go slow, an' I thought I'd better take it. I drawed out my men an' kin' around ter see what war' ther damage, an' ef I could be ov ary use."

"Captain Tulip! Why, yew're a robber."

"That's w'ot they calls it, mum, but I've high-toned principles, an' ef it war' not fur my wicked partners I'd be a public bennyfatur. When I want ter do a good turn, though, I hev' ter leave them along ther road. I've killed two er three fur not bein' genteel."

"Two or three robbers?"

"Yes. An' that war' why I let Jimmy go by. He's soft ez silk, an' so genteel. How kin I help yer?"

He turned to Vallance, who answered:

"I do not know. I am blind, but they tell me nothing can be done until ropes and men come. My daughter has gone, and they say she has dropped over the precipice."

"She didn't drop, she was throwed!" exclaimed Hannah, suddenly.

"It wuz a bloody murder, an' Hiram Bangs done it."

"Hiram Bangs! War' he in that hearse?"

"He wuz."

"An' whar' he are thar's allers devilment afoot. Ef I'd a' know'd it I b'lieve I'd a' taken a shy at it an' let Genteel crack his whip. An' you—Dog my cats, ef it ain't Zebulon!"

Captain Tulip appeared to be dumb with astonishment, for he closed his mouth with a snap, and staggered back.

"Pon my soul! I b'lieve he knows ye!" exclaimed the woman, and Vallance stood open-mouthed.

"Who—who are you? The voice is strange, yet he knows my name."

He turned to the woman in his perplexity, but she had no answer.

"Never mind, pard. Ef it kin' along in ther way ov bizziness, in course I'd rob yer; but fur ther sake ov old times, ef I kin do ye ary good, let me hear it. Be ye short ov funds? Hyar, take these. Ef ther gal are saved it may be a heap ov expense; an' ef you an' Hiram are going ter lock horns yer wants ther sinners of war. Le'me take a squint. P'raps I kin do somethin'."

He rattled this off in a disconnected sort of way, and while he did it was thrusting a heavy handful of gold coin into the pocket of the blind man. Then he turned away and looked over the ledge.

He came back shaking his head.

"Don't see nothin' ov her, an' it wouldn't do nary good ef I did. Let Jim run ther outfit when he gits hyar. It's ye'r best hold. Mebbe I kin do suthin' furder on. I'll try it. An' don't yer furgit that Bangs are a snake. Goin' ter shoot him meself some day ef it ain't done sooner. So long."

He scurried away, leaving the man and the woman to try to guess who it might be who was an acknowledged road-agent and yet appeared to know them both.

All the time was not taken up in that way, however.

The lone woman explored the edge of the precipice pretty thoroughly; she called to Dora, she shouted for help; she did everything she could think of, or that the blind man could suggest.

No good came of it, and she was on the verge of hysterics when she heard the gallop of a horse, and shortly afterward saw the Genteel Sport returning.

At various distances behind him came other horsemen, just as they had strung out in the race.

"All right up to the present time," Jim said, as he flung a huge coil of rope to the ground.

"Help coming by the million, and we'll know the best shortly. It may not be much when you hear it, but it will clear the matter up. After all, this seems to be about as good a spot as we can find to begin operations."

He threw one end of the rope over the rocky edge of the trail, and followed it downward with his eyes. To him it seemed, if he could get over the first hundred feet of the route, the rest might be easy. By the time half a dozen men had

ridden up he had his plans made and was ready for action. With just a glance at the rope, to make sure it seemed safe, he swung himself over and began the descent.

And then, suddenly, the rope parted, and he dropped downward.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN TULIP UNDER FIRE.

Genteel Jim was coming down with his wits all about him, and ready for any emergency.

The breaking, or the parting, of the rope was the unexpected, but it did not find him unprepared.

And, fortunately, he was over the worst part of the way, though it did not seem so from above.

He held on to the cord at the risk of being dragged over, and caught by foot and hand in a crevice, thanking his stars he had not been trusting an ounce more to the rope than had been necessary.

Even then he had time to think of treachery, but it was only like a flash, and the next instant he dismissed the idea altogether.

If he had any debts to pay, they could wait for consideration till the time came.

He could not hang there for ever, and the sooner he acted the more strength he would have to meet the crisis.

"Edge over a leetle, if you kin!" shouted the woman from where, on hands and knees, she looked down on the thrilling scene.

Now that he was down this far the surface changed somewhat, and if he could only gain it, there was a projecting hump to which he might fasten his rope, if he cared again to trust himself to it.

He saw that himself, and made a desperate effort, flinging himself along the face of the rock.

It was an awkward place to be, and even the sport could not judge altogether of his powers and the distance.

He reached the rock, indeed, one arm clasping at it, but it slipped away from him like glass.

There was no way by which he could get a purchase, and he went sliding downward once more.

Hannah Dunlop shrank back, covering her face with her hands to shut out the sight, and began something which one of the men irreverently called a death-song, and harshly yelled at her to dry up on.

Genteel Jim was not lost—yet!

The sport was as cool as the coolest, though he knew the chances were against him.

He brought his feet together firmly, as being the best way to save himself from hurt, and tried once more to reach a smaller projection twenty feet or so lower down.

It seemed to him he had it. This time his hold was more certain, and with life or death depending on how he hung, he was certain to do his best.

He did check his speed, but that very checking wrenched the rock from his arm, and, glancing down, he saw no hope for him. There was a sharp edge of granite not far below, and when he reached that the incline, for a distance at least, ended, and there was sheer descent.

It seemed to come racing up to him, and the crowd above gave a groan as he disappeared.

"Rough's no name fur it," groaned a tall miner, who had shot more than one man in his time, and was supposed to be proof against anything.

They stared down, but saw nothing of the sport. There were two bodies now to look for, and no volunteers for the contract.

There was another coil of rope, but no one wanted to risk himself where Genteel Jim had failed, and there was some talk about going around by the Notch, and trying it from below.

The general opinion was that both of the corpses would be found at the bottom.

For reasons of his own, Genteel Jim was saying nothing, though he was very much alive.

He had hung a trifle on the granite edge, though it was hardly noted, and when he

dropped it was only with the momentum gained from that point.

That was hard enough before his feet touched bottom, had he not fallen like a cat, and, as it was, he pitched forward straight on the brink of a hundred feet of sheer descent. It took a miracle to save him.

The miracle was there.

In the nick of time a man grasped him with powerful hands, and with the same movement threw himself backward, bearing the sport with him.

Side by side they lay on the smooth ledge, which was barely a brace of yards wide, and while the men were calling from above, and Hannah Dunlop's lips were moving in what seemed more than ever like a death-chant, Genteel Jim was recovering from the shock of looking death in the face.

And in his hand he still clutched the rope.

"Thankee, pard!" said Jim, a bit later, sitting up and giving a keen look at the man who was staring down at him.

"Can't say your face is altogether familiar, but it ought to be. You saved my life."

"Don't worry about that. It all goes in ther day's work. I'm in business around hyar, an' they call me Captain Tulip."

"The blazes you say!"

"That's what she amounts to, purty much all ther time. Ef they got a chance from up thar' they would be blazin' down at yourn truly, an' fur that matter, puttin' two an' twa tergether, I wouldn't wonder ef thar's some thar' ez would be glad ter scoop us both. Cut loose on ye, an' let yer drap, did they?"

"Can't prove it by me—yet. I'll attend to that later on. What's your lay, right now? Don't reckon there will be any nonsense between us two for the present."

"No; et wouldn't be genteel. I'm aimin' ter find that corpus, ef et is on'y ter spite old man Bangs. Twixt you an' me, I ain't sure she's passed ther range, an' I war' goin' down ter see."

"See here, Tulip—if that's the handle you want to go to dinner by—who is this Bangs? He was on the hearse, and I didn't like the looks of him. I heard the anxious mourners down at Doghole making a wail because his lordship had been in danger; but I'm a stranger in this section, and before we go farther I want to know who it is I am going to run against."

"He's a p'ison snake, that's what he is; an' Doghole'll find out ef et don't know et yet. Et's him ez hed Zack Vallance jumped, an' et's him ez would jest ez soon yer fished a stiff up outer ther Flume. He's a big gun at Doghole; an' a big thief, too. Ef ole Hanner told ther truth et's a even guess that he hed suthin' ter do with ther makin' ov et. Now, quit ye'r foolin', ef yer got good an' rested, an' we'll see ef we cain't head off ther blamed rattler. Et won't be jest in ther line ov bizziness, but I kin let et go in ther day's work."

Captain Tulip hit the cause well enough when he hinted that this talk was to fill up a resting spell.

Even Genteel Jim had a few nerves somewhere under his vest, and they had been sorely tried.

He braced himself at this, and Tulip continued:

"When Zebulon told me I thought I'd try a whirl on my own hook, an' things is a workin'. Kim' along, an' we'll keep outer sight ov ther gerloots above. I'm a old hand at this line, an' I've b'in down these rocks afore."

Together the two men went creeping along the ledge, wh'ch, to the surprise of the sport, offered quite a practicable route, and was hidden from view.

For a while it was a careful scramble, where a slip meant danger, if not death.

"Didn't I told yer so?" exclaimed the captain, in a low voice, and halting suddenly.

They were near to the boulder behind which Jim had located the fallen young lady. They were both breathless and excited.

Miss Dora was there, and living.

She was sitting, crouched on a jutting

fragment of rock, just where, by chance, she had lodged, and though bruised and shaken, had miraculously escaped serious injury.

More than that. Though she saw the help coming to her, she held her peace. She had no breath to waste, and doubted not they would speak when the time came.

"Stiddy, gal! We're right in town, all dressed up fur fun, an' ef you'll only leave us run this thing we'll pull yer through. But ef yer gits skeered you'll dump ther outfit. Kin yer trust us?"

Dora nodded. This rough man was a stranger, but he had come to her aid, and she didn't know why she shouldn't. If she had understood who he was it is not likely it would have made any difference.

He waited for nothing more, but, knotting a running noose in the end of the rope which Jim had brought, he cast it lightly over her head and around her waist.

Carefully she disengaged her arms and allowed the loop to tighten.

"Ye'r safe now. Don't take a tumble ef yer kin help et, er you'll git a nasty bump, but scramble over somehow. Et ain't ez bad ez it looks."

There was a gap of perhaps ten feet between them that might have been practicable for a mountain goat. At any other time Dora would have looked at it with dismay. Under the spell of the moment she slid down a few feet until her toes touched a narrow edge of upturned rock, on which it might have puzzled a tight-rope dancer to balance.

Tulip watched her sharply, while Genteel Jim helped to hold the rope. If her feet slipped she could not go far. She balanced against the rock, turned, and, light as a feather, ran across, scarce noting the encumbrance of the rope, and was received in the arms of Genteel Jim, who drew her up on the ledge where he and the outlaw captain were standing.

"My father?" was her first exclamation, as her feet were planted on the safe and solid rock.

"He's up thar, an' waitin'. By this time I wouldn't wonder ef half ov Doghole war' thar' with him. This gent are the responserble party ov ther outfit, an' he'll put yer back in ther lovin' arms ov Zebulon, if an' pervised you'll furgit that yer seen me. I ain't dressed fur company, an' I'm awful modest, so I'd prefer ter see ther old man later on."

Dora looked at him narrowly, not certain if she understood.

"Oh, et's straight goods, an' I kin trust yer ef yer gives ther word."

"I promise."

"Good ez wheat. Foller me—an' Jim, he kin kim' on behind."

Captain Tulip turned and led the way, and unless he had been there to point it out they might have found it difficult enough to follow the irregular and dangerous path he pursued.

Genteel Jim, left to himself, would have preferred to take the chances and work a way down.

"Thar' you be; scrammle out!" Tulip said, at length, pointing to a short route that led up to the trail. "No thanks. Et all goes in the day's work."

And, just as the two turned away, there was a sharp report from above, and Captain Tulip, throwing up his arms, dropped backward from the ledge.

CHAPTER X.

"ET 'PEARS LIKE A MURDER."

"I got him, plum' through ther nozzle!" shouted a voice above, and not knowing but what his turn would come next, Genteel Jim sprang forward and upward, his revolver ready.

Could he have got a glance at the man who fired the shot he would have sent a bullet in front of him to clear the way, but the fellow, whoever he was, had dodged back an instant after firing, and was waving his hat to a little group further down the trail, as the sport leaped up into the roadway.

Dora Vallance, startled by the shot, uncertain what danger was to come, kept closely in his wake, and put her hand on his shoulder with a warning gesture,

which he heeded, though not for the reason which she saw.

Four or five men rushing up with drawn revolvers might not seem more than a mouthful for him when in a white wrath, but the touch recalled him to the fact that he had a female by his side, and if lead commenced to fly it was as likely as not she would be the one to be hurt.

And if he followed his first instinct, and shot down the fellow who had taken the craven shot, there was no question but what the bullets would fly.

It would not be helping Captain Tulip, either, supposing he was not altogether past help.

"What the Hades?" he began, dropping the muzzle of his pistol on the man, who was just throwing up another cartridge into the barrel chamber of his carbine.

"If Doghole don't string you up for that shot I'll have a try at the job myself."

Luckily the ball got jammed and the breech refused to close, or the man might have tried it again. He stared at Genteel Jim as though he saw a ghost, and actually trembled with nervousness.

"Who—who are you?" he chattered.

"I'll sw'ar you war' Captain Tulip when you war' down thar', an' that I chuck'd an ounce ov lead plum through ye'r nose."

"You'd swear to Satan's lie, and trust to the devil to back you up in it. You're mighty quick to recognize Captain Tulip; how does it come? Did you ever train with his band?"

It was a home shot; and the men who had come up, hearing it, laughed. Mike Partridge had been suspected strongly of that very thing. If it had not been for the presence of the rescued young lady they might have helped along the conversation for the sake of the fun.

But Mike had made some bad breaks in his time, which generally hurt no one but himself, and the opinion was that he had made a mistake again.

The laughter changed into a shout of triumph, and in the distance, hearing the voice of her father, Dora waited no longer.

"Remember his request," she whispered in the ear of the sport, and then flitted away, leaving him to tell these men what miraculous tale he chose as to what had happened while hidden from their sight.

"A blamed idiot like him oughtn't to be allowed to fool around with firearms," grumbled Jim, as Partridge, not yet satisfied, went to the brink and stared over.

"Of course, I ought to be glad he can't shoot, but that class hits sometimes; and it's always the wrong man. What I'm wantin' to know is, how did that rope come to drop?"

"Ask us an easy one; we warn't there. But ye'r right about Mike. He is the freshest sucker that ever drawed breath, an' I never heard ov him shootin' arything but his own mule. When yer knows him ez well ez Doghole does you'll let him shoot an' be hanged."

"Thar's a thousand fur his sculp, an' I tho'rt I hed it," grumbled Mike. "I ain't sure but what ther stranger orter sheer ther loss."

"Reckon you ain't sure of anything?" snapped the sport, and with a quick spring he landed within Mike's guard and turned him over his hip.

"There, dog-gone you!"

Holding the bully over his knee the sport delivered half a dozen quick spanks, and then shook him off, and down on the roadway.

Without the least sign that he suspected afterclaps, he strode away in the direction taken by Dora Vallance.

Doghole knew him by reputation, and he was giving them samples, to show he was equal to it.

The meeting between Dora and her father was over, and the sport was just as well satisfied it was, as he did not care to witness any such affecting episodes. It was hard enough for him to go back with them to Doghole in triumph, as he did.

There was no way to escape the crowd that was out from town, and sizing it all up, he doubted if he ought to

call the attention of the men to the gulch and what it contained. His sharp eye caught a fleeting glimpse of a head in the distance, and he had hopes that some of Tulip's men might be near, and would look after their captain.

Doghole had not exactly emptied itself, and there were enough at the Silver Queen to make the reception given the rescued and the rescuers a rousing one.

There were several dozen men who shook the hand of the sport without knowing exactly why they did so; and as many more who had heard of him before, and were glad to do honor to Genteel Jim.

"That's all right, gentlemen," the sport said, at length.

"If I had a capacity that way I would be happy to drink with you all, one at a time, according to your invitations. But the fact is, I'm all hunger, and no thirst, just at present, and if you'll excuse me I'll adjourn to the table. I want my fodder regular, just like any other gent, and because I have done a thing any man would have tried on if he had the chance—and nearly broke my fool neck in the operation—is no reason why I shouldn't have the privilege."

"That's the way to speak to them. I understand you did us all a good turn coming down the Flume, and I want to talk to you about it after supper. I'm Hiram Bangs, half-owner of the Crescent Mine, here, and I think, perhaps, I can do you good."

It was the fat man of the stage, and he spoke in an insinuating tone which told the sport he was trying to make an impression.

He had not liked the man on first sight, and what he had heard and seen since had not caused him to reverse his opinion; but the sport was nothing unless genteel. He expressed his willingness, and went in to the table.

Some time later the landlord sidled up to him.

"Mr. Bangs has gone, but he left word you should come around in half an hour to Leo Crandall's office. He wants to talk business with you."

"That's right enough, but where the Hades is that office? Did he leave his carriage for me at the door?"

The landlord laughed, said it was only a step, and gave directions which were so easy to follow Jim had nothing more to say. It was dark, now, and in half an hour the evening was well under way, and he set out.

Crandall's office was straight down the street, but for reasons of his own it was beyond the busiest part of the town, and there was quite a vacant stretch of ground before it was reached after passing Dirty Ned's rumhole.

The shadows were deep as the sport strode along, and everything at that end of the town strangely silent.

"If I could bank for a cent on my nerves I'd gamble there had been a murder done," said the sport, with that involuntary shiver one gives, as it is said, when some one is walking over his grave.

"The next best thing is to swear there is one coming. That would be a safe affidavit to take in Doghole, and a fellow wouldn't have to be a prophet, either. There generally is."

With that strange premonition of danger which men who carry their lives in their hands frequently have, he looked keenly around, and suddenly the tall shadow of a man loomed up directly in front of him.

He could dimly see the arm of the man was outstretched, and then came a flare of light, a sharp report, and a bullet went whistling by, so close to his head that the sport was actually inclined to believe he had lost a lock of his hair.

His own pistol was out like a flash, but quickly as it came the movement of the man had begun; and it was one least expected. The arm dropped, the figure toppled over, and fell with a dead thud, which the sport's quick ear noted had a lifeless sound.

Genteel Jim had played the drop game too often himself not to know its weak point,

and he held his fire. The moment the fellow touched the ground he would have a surer shot, if he chose to take it; but he was not certain he would choose to shoot at all.

He gave a great spring, and under almost any circumstances would have had the man at his mercy.

But the man did not move.

Pistol in hand, Jim bent over and touched him.

He was dead.

At the same time he heard from the neighborhood of Dirty Ned's a shouting; and, nearer, the noise of running feet. He hardly had time to straighten himself up when half a dozen men were at his back and had him covered.

"Jest go easy a minnit," said the leader.

"This thing wants lookin' inter. Et 'pears like a murder."

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. DUNLOP'S PROMENADE.

When the stage halted a good deal of attention was given to the Vallances, probably more to Genteel Jim, while Hannah Dunlop hardly attracted any at all.

This gave her no trouble. She had recovered control of her nerves, and thought only of the young lady.

When, after some time, she was satisfied that Dora needed her no longer, she made some arrangements in regard to her baggage, and drawing up her skirts slightly to keep them out of the dust, which lay almost ankle deep in front of the hotel, she stalked away with a sniff of scorn.

The loungers in front of a stage station were evidently beneath her notice.

Straight out of town she went, with a stride almost masculine, and looking neither to the right nor the left.

No one had paid the slightest attention to her so far as she could see, and that circumstance was by no means disagreeable, if the truth had been known.

She kept on until fairly out of town, and then, just at the spot where the trail made a bend, looked backward once, and only once.

It was a fleeting glance, but it seemed to show she had a bare idea that some one might be following.

"I swan tew mussy ef I don't believe it's that p'izen reptile ez shot his gun off. What kin he want of me?"

She caught a glimpse of a man striding along in her rear, and though he neither said nor did anything to attract her attention, she shrewdly suspected that he was in pursuit.

"Kim' on, you scallywag," she muttered; "if you come foolin' 'round Hannah Dunlop yew'll wish yew hadn't. You long-legged, slab-sided rascalion, az would shoot a man unbeknowns! I ain't afear'd of yew, not if thar' war' a dozen of yew."

Hannah was a good walker, but the man in her rear rapidly overhauled her. She could tell that by the growing distinctness with which his footsteps came to her ears.

Nearer and nearer they sounded, but still there was no word from him, and the woman gave no sign she knew he was in her wake.

Then suddenly she wheeled about and faced him.

"Shoo!" she shouted.

"Go 'way from me! I'm a lone woman, but I kin protect myself, and it air not w'uth while tew try tew rob me. I've no money, but, thanks tew mussy, I've got a voice."

The man was taken aback by the sudden change of front and overwhelmed by her flow of words.

He looked at her dubiously, licking his lips in a nervous way, trying to muster up his courage, which appeared to have deserted him at this unexpected assault.

It was only a woman, after all; and though she was tall, and bony, and had a pair of eyes that snapped and stared by turns, she did not seem to be very dangerous.

"Who's goin' ter rob yer?" growled the man.

"I jest want ter hev' a leetle talk. You kilm' over in ther hearse?"

He asked the question in as insinuating a way as he could assume, but Hannah was on her guard. What business was it of his whether she came on the stage or not?

"I reckon yew air the galoot that tried to murder a gentleman in that coach. They air talking about it tew town, and I heard say they'd hang yew if they caught yew. I don't want ter talk tew no sich trash."

"Trash, ye'rself. Ef I talked all I knowed mebbe they'd be after hangin' you. They'd hussel Dick Dunlop over the route, anyhow."

"I knowed I didn't want tew talk tew yew. Thanks tew mussy, I hev'n't hed occasion tew make myself common with sich a liar. It's a blessing Dick ain't here. He'd own right up if he broke yewr neck; and how would Doghole ever know fur why? Keep away from me or I'll do it myself."

She shouted out the last sentence in a sharp tone which was almost a scream. Mike Partridge was edging up in a way she thought meant mischief.

"Oh, say, now," he began.

"I ain't saying a word. Jest yew go yewr way an' I'll go mine."

"Not tell you opens out about the chap you war' chinnin' with."

"Yew insultin' heathen! I'll scratch yewr eyes out, yit."

"No, ye'r won't. Jest listen ter reason."

"Keep ye'r distance, then. I'm willin' tew see if a onregen'rate wolf like yew be hez reason."

"Cap'n Tulip hed laid out ter hold up ther hearse, an' ef it hedn't bi'n fur luck he'd 'a' done et!"

"And a good thing, too, if he had got hold of Hiram Bangs. The varmint needs robbin', or 'most anything, tew let him know that he's considerable lower than the angels."

"That's nothin' hyar ner thar'. Ef it's Tulip I'm after. Thar's a big reward."

"One that yew will never git. You couldn't take one side of him."

"But I kin tell them ez kin. I'm out after the coin that's in him, an' I'm goin' ter git it. Ef you kin give me a p'inter I'll make it w'uth ye'r while."

He tried to be confidential, but Hannah would have none of it.

"I've no p'inters tew give, an' I've nothin' to dew with a sneak an' a coward like yew be. Foller me a foot further if yew dare."

She shook her fist at him, and it was one that looked as though it might do considerable execution if dexterously planted. Then she wheeled around and commenced to stride away again.

Mike, suddenly springing forward, seized her by the shoulder.

"No, yer don't, old gal; not tell yer tells me what Tulip war' a sayin' ter ther old man, and what ther old man said ter him. Ther' may be rocks in it, an' my side pard seen yer."

There was no doubt but what Mike Partridge only told the truth, and had no idea of molesting the woman for any other reason, but Hannah Dunlop chose to think or talk otherwise.

"Yew low-down villain! Insult a lone, weak woman, would yew?"

This time she turned more fiercely than ever, and without the least hesitation flew at him like a wildcat.

In spite of what she had threatened the attack was a surprise, and her bony fingers were in his throat before he knew it.

With one hand she held him in a vise-like grip, while with the other she clawed at his face, and tore at his hair, now and then striking his cheeks a resounding spat with her open hand.

"Insult a woman, will yew? Take advantage of a helpless, unprotected female? Take that, an' that, an' that!"

Her hand came down harder with each repetition. The unprotected female was giving a very good account of herself, while Mike had but little to say.

He struggled and squirmed, and once or twice struck fiercely at his antagonist;

but there seemed to be a world of strength in her bony arm, and just at those moments she held him out at its full length, and then was at him again with renewed vigor.

"Let up, cuss ye!" he mumbled, at length. "I suspected him an' Dick war' in cahoots, an' now I know it!"

"Yew do! Ef it wasn't for restrainin' grace I'd scratch yewr eyes out. Help! Help! Thanks tew mussy, here's Richard at last."

She suddenly let go, sprang back, and commenced to fan herself vigorously with her apron.

"What ails Hanner?" laughed a rasping voice at Partridge's back, and a heavy hand caught him by the wrist as his fingers just touched the revolver he was reaching for.

"Oh, I'm so glad yew come. I reckon he wanted tew rob me, an' I fit him off the best I knew how; but what could a lorn woman dew?"

"I shu'd suggest you war' doin' fair ter middlin', but it ain't a woman's work. Guess I'll hev' ter han'le him myself."

"Let up on that," interposed Mike.

"Ther old giraffe knows she's alyin'. I only wanted ter find out what she knew about Captain Tulip."

"Liyin'! Me alyin'! And yew calls me a giraffe. Let me at him!"

She darted forward, and as Partridge had already felt the weight of her hand, he had a holy horror of what might be coming when he was utterly powerless to help himself.

He squirmed and struggled; but he might as well have been a child in the grasp of the short, thick-set man who held him.

He gave a violent wrench, but it seemed scarcely noticed.

"Easy, sonny, mighty easy over ther rough places, er you may take a tum'le. 'Low me ter introduce yer. Hanner, my woman. Hanner, this are Mike Partridge, an' not half ez bad a man ez he thinks. Now, what's ther issoo?"

As, at the same time, he warded off Hannah with his upraised left hand, Partridge regained courage somewhat, though the coming of this man was a good deal more than he had bargained for.

If he had been given his choice he would sooner have dealt with Hannah.

Mrs. Dunlop halted in her rush, and, so to speak, plumed her ruffled pinions.

She smirked a little, as though from pardonable vanity.

"It ain't for me to say yew should be too hard on 'im. He wanted few talk, an' I wouldn't lessen. Mebbe he insisted tew much, but indeed, Richard, yew kin trust me."

"I shu'd smile."

Dick looked at the furrowed face of the man and smiled in fact as well as word.

His smile became so broad that it finally broke into a laugh, coarse and rasping.

"Don't, Dick. It makes me shiver when yew smile. Let the poor shote go. I'm yearnin' tew get home. He won't insult me ag'in, an' there's no harm done. I don't believe he wanted tew rob me, arter all."

"Sure he ain't stole ye'r young an' inercent affeckshuns?"

"Oh, Dick!"

Hannah put her finger in her mouth, and glanced at Partridge, who was almost bursting with helpless wrath.

"Then go, consarn yer!"

He slung Partridge around and started him to going by serving him much as Genteel Jim had done.

Then, with hands on hips, and arms akimbo, he watched the amateur marshal till he got well out of range.

With his head down, Partridge kept going in a sullen way, showing no design of turning on his late tormentors. Dick appeared satisfied.

"Yer doin' well, Hanner. Still a howlin' terror to ther hemale sects."

"Quit ye'r nonsense, Dick."

"An' good ez ever on piety an' per-serves?"

"While yew are foolin' mebbe Tulip are a dyin'."

CHAPTER XII.

THE TROUBLE AT THE DANDY BELLE.

Dick Dunlop's face straightened at once and put on an air of concern.

"Tulip, eh? How's that? What's ther racket?"

"It's a 'hull story a mile long, but I kin give yew ther p'ints in short meter. Zack Vallance's father an' sister was on the stage, an' so was Hiram Bangs. Tulip hed set out to stop the hearse, but it brung up sooner, an' the young lady pitched over the rocks at the Flume."

Dick gave an ejaculation of disgust, and two of anger.

"Ther w'uk ov Bangs, I'll bet a dollar."

"Partly, partly; but luck an' the hand ov Providence in it, moreover. If Bangs didn't kick her foot loose when she was braced in the stage I want tew know. Then she just pitched out, an' the rest ov us went on down tew the bottom ov the Flume."

"An' then?"

As Hannah had said, it was a long story, but she was in a hurry, and cut it short. She briefly sketched what had happened from the time when Genteel Jim took one of the horses out of the coach team and started to Doghole for help to the moment when Partridge took a shot over the head of the sport when he was bringing Dora in safety from the chasm.

"An' the chap that called himself Tulip wuz there and tumbled back over the rocks. I seen him, but thanks tew mussy the rest wuz lookin' the other way."

"An' that's what Mike was tryin' ter pump yer on?"

"Jest that. He don't know much, but he suspected a heap."

"Ef he knewed he'd be skinnin' round by ther Notch this blessed minnit ter git ther body. Hanner, you're a brick. Thar's big money on him yit."

"But yew an' him ain't gittin' it."

"Ye'r bloody right. I got enough ter do ter run my own dump cart. An' it ain't w'u'th while. You kin bet ef Mike went 'round by ther Notch, an' got to ther bottom ov ther Flume, he'd find some one elst thar' than Captain Tulip. Where ther boss goes ther boys foller, an' they'll be takin' keer ov him ef he needs it. Ther shanty's a waitin' fur ye, an' I'm mighty glad ter see yer git home."

"Yew look like it."

"I hope so. How did yer 'spect me to 'pear?"

Dick shrugged his shoulders. He was aware of the fact that even Hannah was not beyond the range of sentiment, but he was not much of a hand for it himself. He fancied it would look too ridiculous.

"That's nothin' here nor there. I'm glad there's like tew be some one tew look after him, road-agent if he be. What's b'in goin' on since I've be'n gone?"

"A heap, Hanner; a ding-blasted heap."

"No swearin' afore me, Richard!"

"Not a swear. I tuck it out while you b'in gone. I kin rest a while, but it's ernuf ter make one string a blue streak ov fire an' brimstun'."

"What is?"

The strangely assorted couple had been plodding on together since the time they were fully satisfied that, for the present, they are done with Mike Partridge.

It was still some distance to the cabin which Mike called his home, and to which he was taking his wife.

There was time to explain, and Dick Dunlop was by no means loth.

"I kin trust you, an' I'll say afore you, what it mightn't be healthy ter say afore some of those ez runs ther town, thet I mean what's b'in goin' on at ther Dandy Belle."

"Which wuz?"

"Ther way pore Zach passed in h's cheeks, an' ther rest ov ther yarn accountin' fur it."

"That's what I've b'in yearnin' tew know. I know what his poor father an' sister think; but it's the trewth I want."

"Mebbe you'll git it, an' mebbe not. It's onder a cloud, an' Doghole ain't prezackly wantin' ter talk about it tell they know more theirselves. But I kin give yer ther racket ez it 'pears on ther suffase."

"Tew mussy sake give it, then. This long-winded dodgin' ain't like yew. It's time I wuz back."

It may be as well to condense the story as it was developed, for Dick took his time and Hannah asked many questions.

The story was not completed until after the pair had reached their cabin.

Zack Vallance, the owner of the Dandy Belle, had a good reputation for a long while, though not altogether popular.

He attended too closely to h's business and spent too little time at the free-for-all saloons.

Occasionally he made his appearance at such places, and then he seemed to have plenty of money, though his mine never had the reputation of being a payer. The supposition was that the more money you put into that hole in the ground the less you would take out.

He had half a dozen men working for him, and they were as close-mouthed as he was, so it was hardly from them the camp learned that Zack had struck something like a bonanza.

Some claimed it was fabulous pay-rock, while others said it was only the richest kind of a pocket. No one knew where the news came from, but all the same, it was accepted as a fact.

There were several items of interest being discussed about the same time.

One was a certain outlaw and road-agent, known as Captain Tulip, who flourished in that section of the country, and who had killed some travelers, robbed many and terrorized all. In one of his clean-ups he had got away with much treasure belonging to citizens of the camp, and so was decidedly unpopular in that neighborhood.

Another was the advent of Hiram Bangs, who came, looked around, and bought an interest in the Crescent.

He was represented to be a man of means, and certainly played that character to the life. When Doghole understood that he intended eventually to settle there, and add to the power of his capital the influence of his presence, there was great congratulation.

When there happened to be a bit of friction between Bangs and the young owner of the Dandy Belle one evening, at the Crystal Palace, public opinion was divided as to who was in the right, and anyhow the sympathies of the town went with the richer man, though he was a stranger.

After that came the sensation of the season.

Captain Tulip had been reasonably active, excitement ran high, and it was whispered that the road-agent and some of his gang had been traced to the vicinity of the Dandy Belle.

The result had never been as clearly understood as it might have been, but Dick Dunlop knew about it, and gritted his teeth as he explained.

There was another hold-up, and a crowd went out to investigate.

A score or two of men were in the exploring party, and it had been whispered among them, and probably through the town, that several times Captain Tulip had been suspiciously near to Zack Vallance's mine.

The Dandy Belle was captured by strategy, the drop got on its owner, and the men who worked for him, and a thorough search made.

Several masks were found, carefully hidden in the recesses of the mine, and a mail pouch which had been emptied of its contents.

After that there was a hullabaloo, and some sort of a trial by lynch court law.

As the guilt of Zack seemed fairly proved, he was elevated at the end of a rope, along with one of his men, who appeared to fit the description of one of Captain Tulip's companions.

The rest of the employes at the Dandy Belle received a touch of the stick, and were warned out of the district on pain of being hanged.

This was the story Dick Dunlop had for his wife on her return from a lengthy visit.

"An' he wasn't Captain Tulip after all?"

ejaculated Hannah, when she had heard the tale.

"I sh'd suggest."

"What did they dew about it when they found it wasn't him?"

"I dunno' ez they found it out yit. Some body kerried away ther corpus, an' somehow Tulip seems ter hev' kim' ter life, fur he's on ther ground, ez you orter know."

"Thanks tew mussy, I don't know nothin'. But how about the mine?"

"Wal, they wanted ter jump it, I reckon, but the boys wouldn't quite stan' that. Ef they couldn't git a sheer in it theirselves they wa'n't goin' ter see it tuck in by ther Crescent."

"Good fur the boys! The blind man an' h's darter'll kim' in fur their rights, arter all."

"Dunno'. I don't reckon the boys could a' bluffed them Crescent fellers ef they hadn't hed some help. They got a hint signed by Tulip that he war' a watchin' ov 'em, an' that he'd shoot fur fun at fu'st, but arter a bit he'd go in earnest ef they didn't take the hints. They took 'em, ez fur ez could be seen, an' the Dandy Belle's a waitin' fur her."

"The Vallances don't know nothin' about this lynchin'."

"Don't reckon thar' war' much said. Letter only remarked thet Zack war' dead, an' they sh'd kim' on an' take possession."

"An' that's what brought Bangs down. Heaven's mussy help her. He's goin' tew take her tew git the mine."

"Mebbe, mebbe; but it's all a mux. Jest keep ye'r eyes peeled, an' do ye'r level best ez it kim's. Mebbe it'll all be right in ther end."

"If I kin help the young lady it'll be made right."

"Jest go slow, Hanner; go slow, an' don't git excited. Hold ye'r age tell ther time kim's 'round ag'in ter chip. That's what I'm a doin', an' it's your best holt."

Mrs. Dunlop shrugged her shoulders.

'She had taken more than a little interest in Dora, and had heard things about Bangs which made her hate him. With her excitable disposition it was not likely that she could be either cautious or prudent; but it was certain she would have courage and the use of her tongue. She would probably have had a good deal more to say had it not been that her appetite interfered.

Fortunately Dunlop had a good supply of bread and cold meat, and it did not take her long to have a cup of tea ready. She seated herself resolutely to eat her first meal at home in silence.

"Frien's all well?" asked Dick, in quite a different tone.

Hannah nodded.

"Think Miss Vallance'll kim' 'round all right?"

"That's about the ticket!"

"An' got sand ernuf ter make a fight fur ther Belle?"

"Sart'in. Sand that is all grit!"

"Hope so. There's rocks thar', though I don't see whar' they're at, an' she orter hev' good backin'."

"Better'n yew an' me?"

"Heaps."

"There's a sport that's ready tew show her how tew play her hand, an' a man by name of Andy Reever sez he'll see fair."

"Reever! Andy Reever! Good fur him! He's a squar' man."

"Hush!"

She held up her hand, for there was the unmistakable sound of footsteps outside. A moment later there came a knock at the door.

"Hello! Dick Dunlop, are you there?"

asked an impatient voice.

"What's wanted?" asked the miner, as he carelessly slouched to the door.

"Hands up!" answered the same voice, sharply, and at the same time a second man sprang past him into the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

HUNG BY THE HEELS.

Hannah had been trying to answer the questions of her spouse between mouthfuls, and had succeeded fairly well. This interruption, however, came just when she

was about to struggle with a particularly refractory chunk of meat.

Startled at the sudden appearance of the man before her, she tried to bolt it, and the result was disastrous.

It went down to where it could do the most harm, and then stopped.

Such a coughing and spluttering had never been heard in that neighborhood, and the sound of it should almost have reached Doghole.

Her face grew first red and then black, and her eyes began to protrude. Before her visitor knew what was the matter she appeared to be in the last stages of strangulation.

Dick recovered his senses first of all.

"Shoot, an' be hanged to yer!" he exclaimed, as he wheeled and dashed to the table.

"Ther ole woman's a chokin'."

He gave her a great thump on the back, and, without waiting to see its effect, caught her by nose and chin and forced her mouth wide open.

A quick twist of his finger did the rest.

The meat flew out, and Hannah collapsed.

Dick glowered around as he sprinkled some water on the face of his wife. He had experienced some trouble like this before, and knew what to do well enough, but meantime, the intruders were not above taking advantage of the situation.

It was plain enough they were in earnest, and had the pair so surrounded that both escape and fight were out of the question.

From the masks carried on their faces it was not likely they were there altogether on a peaceful errand.

"Sorry, ole man. Didn't mean ter upset things quite so bad, but we hadn't time ter let yer know we war' comin'. Does she often git like this?"

"Quit fool nonsense an' git ter bedrock. What is it ye'r wantin'?"

"We're wantin' ther lady."

"Can't hev' her; that's all thar' is about it."

"Sorry ter insist, but them war' my orders. If she don't come convenient I'm ter bring yer both."

The miner had some sort of wild idea for a moment of making a fight for it then and there. The thought must have shown itself on his face, for the raising of a couple of hands told him how impossible it was to get away from these people.

At the first aggressive movement he could be shot down without ever having a chance, while the worst of it was that he did not care to put himself in a predicament where he must kill or be killed.

"All right," he said, at length.

"Settle it with Hanner. Only I'd like ter know what yer wants with her."

"Frien's comin' ter make us a visit, an' we haven't ary housekeeper ez are wu'th his salt. But a woman, now! Hanner are just ther thing. We'll pay her big wages an' see she don't git inter no trouble."

"Humph!"

"An' won't keep her long."

"Sposin' she won't go?"

"Then we'll hang yer both 'n' go look fur a better woman."

"Thanks tew mussy, I'm better now—and I'll go."

Hannah spoke quite firmly, but with a calmness which was astonishing. Her husband puffed out his fat cheeks and looked her over without a word. When she made up her mind he knew by experience she needed none of his advice.

"That's business, an' the way we want ter hear it. Don't reckon we could find a better woman if we tried. Git on ye'r sun bonnit an' we'll be movin'."

"I'm comin', but I kin tell yew there's a man list'nin' at the winder."

The information was conveyed in a low tone, and the result was about what she expected.

One of the visitors who had entered stole softly to the door. A moment later there was the sound of a heavy blow and a yell proceeding from beyond the window.

"I never gammie," she said, calmly; "but ef I did I'd take tew tew one that it's Mike Partridge."

The offer was a safe one, for it would have won without a doubt.

Though Mike had seemingly given up the hope of obtaining any information from Mrs. Dunlop, and retired toward the town, his retreat was only temporary, and, making a circuit after he had once got out of sight, he came back on their trail.

As he knew something of Dick Dunlop and his ways, he moved cautiously, and for a long time he was unable to get within hearing distance without running more risk than he cared to chance.

From time to time during the journey to the cabin, the short man gave quick, keen glances from side to side, or to the rear, and it was a piece of good luck that Mike remained altogether unnoticed.

Even when the two entered the cabin he was afraid to at once close up, and so it happened that it was only as the visitors approached the front of the house that he dropped quietly under the window at the rear and listened with breathless interest to what was going on within.

Had he been altogether the coward that at times he seemed to be, he might have remained there unmolested to the end of the chapter.

Unfortunately, he had a certain amount of boldness, which, added to his curiosity, sometimes got him into trouble, as it did now.

He could not rest without getting a glimpse of the scene within, and so raised cautiously up.

He dodged down again almost immediately, and had no idea that he had not remained unseen, but there was where he was mistaken.

Hannah's eyes at that instant happened to be roving toward the window, and they took in the lurker.

He did not hear the softly-uttered warning, and was once more trying to take a look, when some one stole silently up, and, without a word of warning, struck out at his head.

Down he dropped with a shout, but he was very little harmed, and was perfectly conscious when his assailant seized him by the heels and proceeded to drag him around to the front of the cabin.

He had no time for resistance, and made no farther outcry. When he felt himself unceremoniously dumped before the door he slowly assumed a sitting posture and glared around.

What he saw was not encouraging.

Neither of the Dunlops was in sight, but there were several men in masks, who greeted his appearance with a coarse burst of laughter.

He felt for his weapons, but found they had been dexterously removed, and so he was evidently at their mercy.

"That's ther blamed spy; what's ter be done with him?" asked the fellow who had effected the capture.

"Hang him, in course. That's what they allers do with that truck."

"Yes, hang ther sneakin' hound; he ain't fit ter live!"

"Hyar's ye'r rope!"

The drift of opinion was setting all one way, and the worst of it was that Mike could have no doubt but what they were in earnest.

He began a little plea for mercy, but was cut short with promptness.

"None ov that, er we won't wait fur ther rope ter do its duty. Git up an' travel."

The cocking of a pistol in the hand of the speaker made his words more emphatic, and Partridge staggered up.

"Now, for'ad, march! Et won't do ter leave ther body 'round hyar. Might git Dunlop inter trouble, which he's a purty square man, ef he is a fool."

"An' et's easier fur him ter march than fur us ter kerry. Roust along. It ain't fur ter go. Ther's a likely tree down by ther trail, an' we'll swing yer thar' fur a holy warnin'."

The fate of the spy was settled without the formality of a trial, and he marched off in despair. He knew where the tree was well enough, and that it had already borne ghostly fruit.

As had been told him, the place of ex-

cution was not far off. When they reached it his arms were deliberately bound, while the man with the rope proceeded to knot a noose in it, which he tried on his own hand with cruel gravity.

Up to this time Mike had contented himself with pleading.

Now he yelled.

Not the least attention was paid to his outcry. The one end of the rope was flung over a limb, while the noose was dropped over his head. The next instant he was swinging in the air.

It was not by his head, however, but by his heels.

The running loop had been allowed swiftly to drop to his ankles before it was tightened, and he was in the air before he understood that he was not doomed to immediate death.

As he swung there, heels up and head down, with a chorus of savage laughter the masked men filed away, and left him to his fate. Only one of them lingered long enough to cast back to him a few words.

"You war' one ov ther gang that took ther Dandy Belle an' hung it's boss. You kin see how it is ye'rself."

CHAPTER XIV.

A FRUITLESS LESSON.

"Hello! What's goin' on hyar?"

Mike Partridge heard the exclamation, but he made no answer. Indeed, if his life depended on it, he could not just then have spoken a word.

He had not been hanging long, but the time for active exertion had passed quickly, and all the more so because he had hurried it along by his useless struggles.

Already his skull seemed to be filled with molten lead, and about to burst, while the cords cutting into his ankles appeared to be eating them off.

He was past the period when he could hope, and had thoroughly given himself up to despair, when a keen knife cut the rope by which he was suspended, and he was easily lowered to the ground. He did not realize that he was saved.

It did not take long for this dazed condition to pass away, and when he stared up he could see that his preserver was bending over him.

"Gittin' better, be ye?"

The party mumbled his words somewhat, but the sound of them brought new vigor to the rapidly-reviving man.

"Jest a minnit; jest a minnit."

"Take an hour. Don't reckon it'll hurt. Keep yer out ov mischief."

"Are they gone?" asked Mike, with sudden interest.

"Didn't see no one. Tho'rt it war' a case ov susancide er I wouldn't hev' cut yer down. What yer b'in a doin'?"

"B'in a courtin'," answered Mike, trying to look sheepish, though the darkness of the evening hid the smirk.

"New style, ain't it?"

"Bout ther averedge result. Ther other feller got ther drop when I war' interested an' hung me up ter dry."

"Served yer right. Next time he'll shoot yer. So long. Better skip afore he comes back."

As Partridge appeared to have fully recovered there was no farther need of ministration, and the rescuer strode away, taking the route to the town.

He had not been at all cordial in his remarks, but if no one else was to come he had undoubtedly saved the life of Mike Partridge, and one would have supposed the latter would have overlooked a few slurs and been correspondingly grateful.

Instead of that, he scowled ominously and uttered a rude imprecation as his hand, wandering to his belt, found it empty.

The lynchers had taken care to remove his weapons.

"A thousand dollars fur him, dead or alive, an' me with my guns gone jest when I hed ther fairest kinder a shot at his back! Blast ther luck! It all goes ag'in' me."

He rose to his feet and stared after the retreating figure.

"Et's Tulip, fur a thousand. Mebbe he

knowed I war' a lyin', but if he didn't I throwed him off that fur. It war' his men ez listed me by ther heels. Wonder ef he's lookin' fur 'em in town. That's whar' he's goin' now. I'll foller him if it takes a leg off."

Trembling with an excitement it was not so easy to bear after his late trying experience, the spy crept along in the wake of the individual he had recognized as Captain Tulip.

If the road-agent went into the town Mike felt sure that he had him, but at the same time he was not so certain he could get in his work in a way which would not divide the reward with too many others.

He would sooner see the outlaw get away for the time being than fail to reap the whole of the reward he had spoken of. Luck seemed to favor both of them.

As he drew near to the town Tulip left the regular trail. So far he had met no one, but the danger of doing so became momentarily greater.

Partridge closed up more and more. He had to keep nearer, and run greater risks. If the outlaw ever suspected his presence something unpleasant would be apt to happen.

Certainly, he gave no sign. Straight on he went, without ever paying attention to what might be in his rear, though from time to time he halted and peered through the shadows in the direction of the camp.

Finally, he slipped into an empty cabin.

"It's Bully Brook's old shack, but Bully pulled out a month ago, an' that ain't b'in nobody livin' it it sence. What's he goin' ter do thar? Most like, wait fur some ov ther gang ez hangs out 'round town."

Mike threw himself down and waited, but no one came. He was not more than a couple of rods away from the cabin, and was certain he could mark down any one who went in or out.

It did not take him long to get tired of his position.

Perhaps there was some one already there waiting for the chief. If so, it would be a point gained to hear the conference.

With the greatest pains he wormed himself along, being careful to draw no nearer until he passed out of sight from the front of the cabin.

He had already had one sharp lesson that evening on the folly of eavesdropping, but it appeared to have done him no good.

An inch at a time, and in the utmost silence, he approached the shanty, and then made a discovery that gave him a rude shock.

There was an opening in the rear, just such as might be made by one who was breaking out in haste.

When he peered into the gloom of the little room he could hear and see nothing.

His game had escaped him.

When he looked around in the direction of the main part of the town he had a glimpse of some one gliding away.

He was not so far off, but it was hard to decide whether it was the man he had tracked here, and he was afraid to follow in too much haste.

It was not altogether too late to trail him, however, so long as he did not get tangled up among the buildings or become absorbed in a crowd.

Right on into the town he went, perfectly at his ease, and Partridge was almost ready to doubt the correctness of his own judgment, especially when he saw him pass several men who gave him a short nod.

"Ef it's Tulip I orter hev' him; an' ef it ain't Tulip I kin know who he is by askin'. George Jefferson! What next?"

His soliloquy came to a sudden ending.

The party in advance had turned sharply and entered the Crystal Palace saloon.

"Ef ther gang's all thar', ez usu'l, it'll take a man an' a lantern ter find him, but he's whar' I kin take a squint, an' be blamed to him."

It was so that when the Palace was running at a full head of steam a man could very well be lost in the crowd which thronged its rooms, and while Mike was pretty sure he could pick the party out, yet he hesitated about making the attempt for fear Tulip in turn would be watching for him.

It would not be hard to make a retreat from the Palace in case the suspicions of the outlaw were excited.

"He's in disguise, ov course, but—"

"Who are?"

In his interest and excitement Mike began to speak aloud, and somehow the question at his shoulder never struck him as out of place until he had answered:

"Cap'n Tulip, cuss him! He's in thar."

Then the temporary spell was broken, and he turned angrily.

He was not quick enough.

A stunning blow landed on his head, and he fell in a heap.

Then he was caught up and hurried away between two men who had stolen up behind him unobserved, though they had followed him ever since leaving the rear of Bully Brook's cabin.

"He couldn't do much hurt," said one of them; "but blast aidgeot, aryhow. We'll kerry him out to ther Parker shaft an' drop him. He won't git out afore mornin', an' by that time he may hev' got some sense."

Truly, Mike's pursuit of the outlaw was attended with difficulties.

CHAPTER XV.

GENTEEL JIM IN A TIGHT PLACE.

A man less cool than Genteel Jim would have been taken all aback under such circumstances.

The discovery he had made was something of a shock, and the suggestion from the crowd was just the thing to be confusing.

In his own mind the sport had already made up an opinion that it not only looked like murder, but it was a murderer.

And now it seemed likely it was one of which he might be accused. Was there a subtle plot behind it?

It was not probable that all of this crowd which appeared so opportunely on the spot had taken a hand in the matter, but that some of them would know what they were about was a conclusion he reached like a flash.

He knew that in case he did not keep his wits about him, the men who could lay such a plot might be also shrewd enough to have him wound up in the flame of the wrath of an excited crowd.

He turned swiftly, but without a trace of excitement, and there was a deal of laughing scorn in his answer:

"It don't take much education to say that. I was going to make a remark of that kind myself. What you want to do is to get a move on and find the chap who did the murder."

"Don't look ez taugh we'd hev' far ter go."

The man who growled back the answer from the head of the little crowd was known in Doghole as Clapper Carl, and he had been a shift boss at the Crescent.

The sport did not seem to notice the hint.

"No. He was here not long ago. I think I heard his footsteps as I came up."

"You say; but it might ez well be you ez another. Watch him, boys. Who are ther victim?"

Genteel Jim had the pleasure of seeing several men with hands on their revolvers stare his way with no friendly glances. Two or three others pressed forward to the corpse.

"Et's ther long galoot ez kim' in on ther hearse," said one, who was peering down into the set features by the light of a burning match.

"I seen him when he got down, alongside ov Mister Bangs. An' that chap thar' kim' in on ther same wagon."

"Eh? How's that? Not Reever. Not poor Andy Reever!"

Several men had come up from the opposite direction, and by the voice of the last speaker Jim recognized Hiram Bangs.

"You knew him, did you?" asked the sport, apparently oblivious of the fact that he was under guard, and that it would be strange if there was not trouble after a little.

"Knew him! Why, we were partners. At least, we each had a fractional interest in the same investment, and came here in

the stage together. Poor, poor fellow! How did it happen?"

"Some un' hez sunk a lead shaft in his breast, an' afore we go any fur'der I reck-on this young man had better warble his leetle story. Doghole stood it when he plastered ther chap he called Grey Burke, fur he had all his chances when he chipped 'ithout notiss, an' couldn't shoot fur a blamed cent. But this hyar thing seems ter be su'thin' else. Two shootin's ther fu'st day are crowdin' things. By an' by thar' won't be land ernuff' ter furnish him a graveyard."

"If you innocent kids hadn't run all over the trail, that might have told more of a yarn than I have to spin. But you have it so tramped out a 'Pash' buck couldn't lay it by daylight, let alone in the night."

An ominous growl was the answer he got to this frank opinion, and as Hiram Bangs took no steps toward recognizing him, Genteel Jim began to think his lines were not fallen in pleasant places.

Briefly he went on and told his story, without making any comments, or mentioning his suspicions, while the crowd heard him through in sullen silence, though at the end Bangs spoke up:

"But—but there must be some mistake about that. It was Reever for whom I left word 'with the landlord; and no doubt he was coming out to meet me at the office of Mr. Crandall. Could it be possible you shot him by mistake?"

"I'm not very apt to make mistakes in such matters or I would have had a stretched neck long ago."

"But this time you may have made a beginning."

"Excuse me. I used my tools this afternoon, as all Doghole knows. When I had time I wiped them out. They are here now, bright, clean, and a cartridge in every barrel. You can take a squint at them, and I want an expert to look them over, one at a time—a man who will remember the truth, and tell it when he's called on."

"It may be a little hard to find that sort every day in the year, but if it can be done Jack Byles will fill the bill, and here he is. I'll glance at them myself."

Leo Crandall spoke, and if an expert was desired he himself might have passed muster.

"The rest of you keep your distance, please, and that party with the lantern step up so that Mr. Byles can see. I'm not giving up my tools—yet."

The light was none of the best, but it was good enough to show, as Jim exhibited them, that every barrel of his cylinders was loaded, and the weapons were bright and clean.

It was hard to do this without seeming to be off guard for an instant.

Leo Crandall thought he saw his chance and made a spring which carried him into quarters too close for shooting, at the same time making a grab for the little sport, who did not look to be a difficult man to handle, physically.

Genteel Jim was ready for him, however. He stooped a little so as to escape the clutch, and seizing Crandall low down, promptly stood him on his head. Then he was on guard again.

"I'm not running away from any charge you gents may choose to hatch up, but I have been around town a little too much to let the boom start with a bit of foul play. There was no earthly reason why I should shoot Reever; and the whole thing looks a bit mysterious. If you want any more explanations, call around at the Silver Queen, and I shall be happy to give them to you. No, don't, Mr. Crandall. It's not worth while to run the risks. If you draw I'll plug."

Crandall was not exactly the kind of man to be found leading a lynching bee, though it might not have been inconsistent with his dignity to officiate as judge in a court of that character.

But neither was he the man to accept calmly the treatment he had received at the hands of the sport.

He wavered, and perhaps was waiting for some one to shoot.

No one else did take an immediate hand,

however, and after a second of hesitation he allowed his hand to drop from his hip.

"Correct you are," continued the sport, as he saw the sign of truee.

"There's enough here to make a mighty lively fly-around, but the crowd is not large enough to represent Doghole and a lynch court. When it is I'm willing to talk it over and see what can be made out of it."

"Thar's crowd enough hyar to—" began Clapper Carl; but Crandall called him down.

"A minute, if you please. I am supposed to represent law and order, and perhaps the gentleman is right in what he says."

"Right—blazes! Hyar's him with a gun in his fist, an' thar's him with a ball in his breast. What more do you want?"

Clapper Carl would have been a good man to have led an emeute, but Crandall was the man who controlled the crowd, and Crandall was the man whose dignity had been insulted. What he said went; and he held up his hand.

"There is reason for suspicion, but the proofs are not all plain, and I know how it is when such a crowd gets to moving. Reever may have been shot by accident; but with no more representation than Doghole has present it is pretty certain that some half dozen will be shot on purpose unless you propose to kill this stranger first and try him afterward. I know him by reputation."

"Thanks. You couldn't have hit my platform neater. In all my life I never kicked on the law as it ought to be, and I never failed to give a good account of myself when anything else tried to crowd me."

The sport was as cool as the coolest, and kept the crowd at arm's length by sheer force of will. After all, there was little evidence against him, and Crandall might well be excused for temporizing.

"We'll let it go at that, for the present. But I warn you, if there is any attempt at bolting, you will be shot on sight. Three or four men will keep track of you till the truth seems to develop, and it will be time enough then to proceed to extremes."

"I take it, then, the appointment at your office is off?"

"Never was any! Never was any!" broke in Bangs, positively.

"So you say—now?" retorted the sport, as he coolly turned his back on the party and strolled away.

It took courage to run the chances, but his hands were near his weapons, and sooner than have trusted to the tender mercies of that crowd, once they got to going, he would have fought them all, even with the rest of the town behind them.

CHAPTER XVI.

LEO CRANDALL'S VIGIL.

There was a hush on the group as Genteel Jim turned away.

They were used to seeing men of nerve at Doghole, but somehow this was a little beyond every-day experience.

Had he hypnotized them all, or had they really all been treated to a straight bluff, which had won on its merits? Hiram Bangs and his partner asked each other the question—and hardly had answers pat.

Bangs recovered his wits with a long breath.

"For pure sand he takes the cake. And he won't run, not a step. We can pick him up again whenever we want him. And you bet, we're not done with him yet."

"And we were eight to one."

"That's right; and it was a heap easier for the one man to know what he wanted to do than for the dozen. That's whera he had us."

"It wasn't all bluff, either. When I chipped he stood me up neater than any other man ever did it in my life."

"Ha! ha! If it had been any one else but the invincible Crandall the boys would have taken a hand in right then and there."

"That's so," put in Clapper Carl, who was listening eagerly.

"But ef you played it alone we couldn't assist."

"Never mind, never mind," hastily interposed Bangs.

"The sport will keep, and we're not done with him yet. The next time we will have all Doghole looking on. There's something else to think of now."

"Yes. It won't do to let poor Reever lie here. What shall we do with him?"

"Take him to the office, of course. That's the nearest place, and the natural one for him to go to. Four of you men catch hold and the rest keep the sport in sight until you hear further."

"An' ef ther chance comes shell we down him, boss?" asked one of the men.

"Not unless he tries to skip—which is not likely. He must have a fair show, with everything open and above board."

"Jest ez well we don't hev' ther job. Thar's b'in two shots at him alriddy sence he struck ther deestrick, an' some think ther lead ain't run ter drap him."

"But the rope will," added another.

"An' et's ther only thing ther will."

It was rank superstition, but one that, just at present, Genteel Jim could have no objection to. If he had heard it expressed he would hardly have cracked a smile.

For reasons of his own Hiram Bangs felt much the same way, and he nodded a seeming assent.

"Let it go at that, and get down to business. Who helps with the body?"

It was not a bit of work that any of them cared to do, but Clapper Carl stepped promptly forward, and as he did so picked his aids.

Those who were to follow the sport stole away, while the four bearers picked up the body and moved with slow steps toward the office.

There were two rooms in the little building, and on a table in one of them the corpse was deposited.

"Have to watch with him, I suppose; and I'll pay regular wages for night-shift work to two of you. And Carl, you better see about getting a box made. The funeral will have to be to-morrow, and we must get him ready for planting."

"Reddy Jackson kin do that," answered Carl, to whom Bangs seemed addressing his remarks.

"Ef you kin find him sober thar's ain't no man kin turn out a better job, an' Andy orter hev' ther decentest send-off Doghole kin give him."

"Better see Ready at once. Money is no object, and you can tell him so. Tell him to put the best lumber in the box, if he has to take Billy Sayres's bar to make it out of."

"An' wouldn't Billy be a kickin'?"

The thought of it sent Carl away laughing, Bangs turned, and by the light of a lantern composed the stiffened limbs of the unfortunate speculator, as well as he could, and arranged with the remaining men for the watch.

Then he pondered for a moment before speaking to his partner.

"Looks as though one of us ought to stay here with the—with the remains. You take the first shift, Crandall. I must see Carl again, and arrange for the grave, and the rest. He ought to be planted as soon after daybreak as possible."

"Won't the camp want a look at the corpse, and maybe hold some sort of inquest?"

"Inquest be hanged. We'll have it at the funeral, and they can all have a sight there for their money. After that, if it's not unhealthy for a gent the size of the Genteel Sport I don't know how such things work."

"It will wake them up, and that's a fact."

"Wake 'em up? It will make 'em howl. Show you dead Caesar's body, and all that rot. It's the best thing, after all."

He spoke with a vicious earnestness, which told that it was not justice alone urging him on, but a personal feeling, even stronger than that which Leo Crandall might be supposed to have.

"Don't be too bitter, old man," urged the latter.

"It don't seem possible any one else could have done the trick; but it's not certain. And if he bluffed us it was our own fault. It's only justice we're after."

"So say we all of us—but justice has got to mean a dead sport, and I'm not sure I can wait till morning. There's more than one way to the woods."

"We didn't seem to hit the right one the first time, anyhow."

"No, and now I'll go look for another. See you later."

The anger of Bangs was rising, and he growled as he swung out of the door. If he had remained longer he might have vented some of his wrath on the head of his partner.

He had not gone far from the office when a shadowy form loomed up in his front, and Clapper Carl stepped forward.

"Thought yer might want ter see me ag'in, boss, afore I give ther final order, an' so I jest held on."

"If you hadn't thought so after my tipping you the wink I would have broken your head."

"So yer orter."

"And so I would. There ought to be four of you around that can be trusted. Are you ready for business?"

"Four hyar, an' more ther kin be reached. Say ther word. Is it ter down ther sport?"

"Partly. I suppose that you are game for it?"

"Fur all ther hez coin in it. We've hed a long layoff, an' are down ter bed-rock."

"Well, if all goes right you'll make a strike soon. But it won't do to stand here chinning. It can't all be said in a minute, and the less chance we give to be seen together the better."

"All right. I kin take yer to kiver whar' thar's won't be no list'n'ers. This way."

Without hesitation Hiram Bangs followed, and none too soon.

Hardly had he got beyond hearing distance when Leo Crandall came hurrying to the spot.

"Curse it," he muttered, as he peered around. "I thought I saw him here, and hoped he was coming back. To be there with those brutes gives me the shivers. For a cent I'd go on to town, but I suppose I must grin and bear it till Hiram gets back."

He returned to the office after a little, but it seemed hours before Bangs came again.

Then he appeared, suddenly, at the door.

"Say, there, Crandall, here's news."

Leo Crandall had at last fallen into a doze on his chair. He came back to the world with a start.

"Where? What? Has he got away? Is the mob up?"

"Mob, humbug. It's something better. Shake yourself together and come out of your dreams. There's work to be done."

"All right, now. What is it?"

"The marshal from Weaver City is around, with his deputies, on the trail of Captain Tulip."

"What's that got to do with us? We hung him once. If they're not satisfied with that let them run their own funeral."

"Don't be sarcastic. It may have a heap to do with us. Or we with them."

"How? Speak out, man."

"What's the matter with sending the sport out of town with him? If there's any lead to fly he'll do the catching of it, and we'd as soon give our evidence in Weaver City as Doghole, anyhow."

"Yes, if he'll take him."

"He must take him; and Soft Hand Cy is just the sort to see there are no frills put on when he calls a man to come. I want you to run this thing, though. Come on."

Leo Crandall was not precisely ready, but even this was better than the vigil with the corpse, and there was no great show of reluctance.

As for the men who were to look after the body with them, there was no reluctance at all. Without a word they rushed out of the building and headed for the town, leaving Andy alone with silence and the darkness.

CHAPTER XVII.

LAUREL BLOSSOM.

Genteel Jim went away with a careless swing and without a backward glance.

Had he left only Hiram Bangs behind him he might have been more guarded, but somehow he had confidence in Leo Crandall. Crandall might be under the domination of the coarser-grained speculator, but, nevertheless, he evidently had a certain sense of fair play which would prevent a felon shot being taken.

As for the rest of the party—they would follow the lead of the two men of the Crescent. He could see how Crandall had held them in hand.

"What a thing it is to have a good reputation," laughed the sport to himself.

"A tenderfoot, now, would have been swinging dead by this time, if that gang had been half as anxious to get him out of the way. They don't like to begin putting on frills with Genteel Jim, but sooner or later I suppose they are bound to come."

It was a prudent conclusion to arrive at, and the pity seemed to be that the sport was not ready to turn it to any practical account while there appeared to be time.

He could see he was involved in a mess which had more in it than appeared on the surface.

If he had any suspicions, they took their departure from one particular point—the repudiation of his invitation by Bangs.

That certainly meant something. The sport shrugged his shoulders and concluded, when he thought of it, that he was in the game to stay.

The respite just received was apt to be but temporary, unless the suspicions of the citizens should happen to be turned in some other direction.

Nevertheless, he had not come here to sit around waiting on the wishes of a vigilance committee.

The pastures where, for some little time back, he had been browsing, had grown lean, and in looking for a new field of usefulness, Doghole had been recommended to him.

He had no acquaintance there, but had heard of the town—and it had heard of him.

He took the next stage after making up his mind—and here he was.

In spite of the rather rough deal which had been given him, he did not intend to sulk on his couch at that early hour of the night.

He passed Dirty Ned's without a glance, but when he came to the Crystal Palace he paused, listened for a moment, and then went in.

It was not much of a palace after all, but it was the largest place of the kind in the town, and was receiving its full share of patronage.

Doghole was then in the height of its glory, money was plenty, more was supposed to be coming, and the kinds of diversion furnished there flourished.

The best men of the camp drifted in at the Palace, and so did the worst. Between music, dancing, whisky and the cards it was not hard to make a night of it there.

At a glance he saw the news of what had just happened out on the trail had not reached this place as yet, and his entrance provoked no particular comment.

It was not until he was halfway to the bar a whisper started that he was Genteel Jim, the man who had tool'd the stage safely down the Flume when the brake broke, and Uncle Johnny was looking for a soft place to jump.

The most of them had heard the story, but it would bear repeating, and as his after exploits on the trail were also spoken of, curiosity began to waken up.

Jim noticed that eyes began to be turned his way, but he edged carelessly through the throng, though so far he had not seen a face he remembered.

He had almost reached the bar, when he felt a slap on the shoulder, which caused him to turn promptly.

"Hello, snort! I hope I see you well!"

The salutation, and the sight of the person who gave it, taken together, made a

surprise, though he did not allow it to be seen in his face.

"Oh, it's square goods I'm giving you. I've heard of the high old times on the hill this afternoon, and I should judge you were a whole team, with that same yaller dorg under the wagon. Shake!"

The sport gravely held out his hand.

The speaker was a woman, and a handsome woman at that.

"Laurel Blossom I am, and at your service," she continued.

Laurel Blossom, as she called herself, was young yet—not much over twenty, if looks went for anything.

Her shining black hair was pushed back from a low, broad brow, and fell over her shoulders in a mass of curls. Her eyes were dark, bright, and just now twinkling with good humor. Her features were boldly but beautifully formed, while her figure—just above medium height—was perfection itself.

Few handsomer women than Laurel Blossom could be found anywhere, and none had ever been seen in Doghole.

Sport she seemed to be, yet Genteel Jim decided, as his eyes looked into her great frank ones, that she was a woman worth the knowing, and as good as she was beautiful.

He made no mistake there.

Just when their hands were falling apart, a man came pushing rudely between, thrusting Genteel Jim aside.

"Enough of this, Laurel," exclaimed the man, in a tone hot with suppressed wrath.

"If you dare to carry out your boast it will be the worse for you—and him, too. I'll—"

"What?"

She stuck her handsome arms akimbo, and stared him saucily in the face.

"I'll grind him into powder!" he hissed, stooping that his words might only reach her ear.

He made a little mistake—or perhaps did not think of it—as to the carrying power of his voice.

Every word reached the ear of the sport, who stood listening, an amused look on his face.

"Don't worry about him, Blossom," he laughed.

"I've been there, and know how it is myself. At such times a fellow thinks he is a holy terror. But he gets over it in course of time. He gets over it. And he's blamed lucky if he don't get shot."

Genteel Jim spoke lightly, but his words seemed to hit the young lady hard.

A flush came over her face, and there was a stern ring in her voice as she answered:

"Make no mistake in this. I gave you my hand as one sport gives it to another, for the sake of your nerve on the box. What this fool means is quite a different thing."

The man to whom this endearing term was applied glared at the speakers, and his looks were returned with an unconcern which, under any circumstances, would have been exasperating.

In his way he was as handsome as Laurel in hers, and with much the same style of beauty.

That he was as near to being raving mad with jealousy as he could well come was what Jim thought of him, but he was not so sure he understood Miss Blossom.

Had she meant what she said, or had she acted as she had done simply to force an unwelcome admirer away from her, regardless of the possible consequences.

"Deadly, eh?" he thought to himself.

"I wouldn't wonder if she was, but I'm not so certain she means it. Anyhow, I'm in on the ground floor for a muss, as usual."

So far the man had controlled himself better than the sport expected, though his lips were working like those of a wild beast at bay, and the low snarl which came from between his lips seemed like words crushed into bare sounds by his passion.

"Slowly. Go slowly," said the woman, noting all this, yet without a shadow on her face.

"You are not exactly omnipotent, and if I thought you would play rough with a

friend of mine, because he was my friend, I would drop you myself."

The man found his speech once more, and ceased to be a plaything.

"You are right to take his part; he don't seem like one who could take it himself. But it will not be long before he finds your favors are mighty uncertain, and even they can't save him."

"My favors are for those who please me, and you cannot boast that you ever had any of them. Will you apologize to this gentleman, or must I make you?"

If she was bent on driving him to frenzy she succeeded thoroughly well.

He turned quickly and struck a savage blow at the unprotected face of Genteel Jim.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WOMAN OF NERVE.

It was really a relief to the sport to have the crisis come.

He had been standing around too long, hearing mere talk, and this little difficulty which was being forced upon him was simply a nuisance.

Besides, it was attracting attention; bystanders were beginning to crowd around, and he heard remarks which convinced him the partisans were not all on one side.

He was ready for either shot or stroke, careless though he seemed, and the blow rolled harmlessly along his forearm, and he hit in return, lengthening himself as he hit.

The spot of the blow as it landed was heard all over that part of the room, and the man went blundering back. He would have fallen had he not stumbled against a friend, who gave him a momentary support while he recovered his equilibrium.

For an instant he was all abroad, and in that time Jim had space for a few remarks.

"You'll excuse me, miss; but when that sort of work begins I can't stop to consider whose friend it is who has to go down. I haven't been very long in Doghole, but everybody seems to have it in for me, big as a bear."

As he spoke his right hand dropped naturally into his skirt pocket, on the derringer lying there, which clicked audibly.

The man had recovered, and was coming back, this time with a knife.

The sport never drew, but simply turned his wrist and had him covered. He was about to utter his warning when a man sprang from the crowd, and, catching him by the wrist, just outside of the pocket, forced his hand down.

"At him, Harry! Slice him! He can't hurt!"

"Let him go! I'll take the chances with his irons and have his life all the same!"

Harry Hall asked for no help to do his work, and he sprang forward with his knife-upraised. As he came within reaching distance he struck downward with all his might at the breast of Genteel Jim.

The blow was well aimed, and would have gone home had it not been for Laurel Blossom, who had as quick an eye as either of them, and a courage equal to the best.

She threw her hand up swiftly, and the steel grated along the barrel of the pistol it held, and went sliding harmlessly to the side.

Almost at the same moment, though a shade later, the sport made a half-arm hit with his left which released him, and then, snatching his right from his pocket, struck a terrific blow with the clubbed derringer.

As the fellow who had grasped his wrist was dropping, he wheeled and was ready for Harry Hall.

The short tube stared the raging man in the face, and the finger of Genteel Jim was on the trigger.

The wonder was that it did not tighten.

How it would have ended it is hard to say, had Laurel not continued to play a hand. She had allowed the affair to run on without taking a decided stand, but the time had come to act, unless she wanted to see one or the other of the two pass over the range, and she was not ready for that.

Hall was crouching for a spring, and the sport was smiling into his tigerish eyes, waiting till the last second came, when

Laurel sprang between them, forcing up the derringer of the one, and covering the other with her own weapon.

"Hold right here, and the man who does not hold settles with me, or, rather, I'll settle with him. Do you hear me, Harry Hall?"

"And I would remark," added a voice which the sport had not before heard, "that if any outsiders undertake to join the quartette without special invitation they will be apt to go down hard. The game is set as it is, and nobody else wants to come in until there's a new deal."

The speaker was a young man of much the same build as the cause of all the trouble.

He had just entered the room, and he promptly ranged himself at Laurel Blossom's shoulder.

He did not produce a weapon, but every one knew that he had a supply handy that would come into sight and use when the time came. From the way his announcement was received it was plain that he was something of a chief.

"Curse you, Mark Wharton! Wasn't it enough they had me double-banked already without your coming into the game?"

"Easy, Harry; easy, lad. I don't know that I have any call to interfere with you. It's the outsiders I'm talking to. But, still, if you hunger for it, I've no doubt Blossom will retire and leave the matter in my hands."

"It's not her cap, either. I have this fellow's mark on my head, and I'll have my knife in his heart. After that—"

"Yes. After that?"

"I'll be ready to settle with you. It's neither her quarrel nor yours."

"Listen to the man!" exclaimed the woman.

"The stranger interfered to protect me from insult—"

"Not insult from me."

"Yes, from you. We may as well talk plainly. I have never given you even the encouragement of a friend, yet you undertook to regulate my choice of acquaintances. I was loth to resent it in a way that might lead to blood, but I can allow no man to fight my battles for me. How is it to be? Flag of truce, or war, with the advantage on my side?"

"Blossom, you would not have me take water like that?"

"Yes, I would. I know you from the ground up. If you don't, one of you two men will be killed, and I won't have it."

She stamped her slender, shapely foot to emphasize her words, and her hand never wavered.

"But we've got to fight."

"Not here, and this night. Give me your word, or I swear to you I will shoot you dead, and Doghole may do as it likes after the inquest."

"You surely would not kill me?"

"I surely would, and I'll give you while I count ten to make up your mind in."

"Must I kill or be killed?"

"You surely must. One, two, three, four, five—"

"Hold! I cannot harm you, and until I do I cannot reach him. I would not go out of life and leave the score with him unsettled. I give up for to-night, but let him beware of the next meeting."

He flung his knife down at the feet of Laurel Blossom, and stood with arms folded.

Doghole, as a rule, had little use for men who took water, but in this case it was different.

Something like a cheer went up, for the men in the room were well satisfied to see the deadlock broken in this way.

Without a doubt Laurel Blossom was popular there, and no one, whether friend or foe of Harry Hall, cared to see her slay a man in what seemed too much like cold blood.

Yet not one but believed she would keep her word if tempted too far.

"All right, stranger," he said, between his clinched teeth.

"The girl saves you, but beware of tomorrow."

And with a flaming face he moved off in the direction of the door.

"Sorry, sport, that I had to call the jealous fool down myself, but it wouldn't have done to have had you shooting him, or he slicing you up in his customary happy style."

"I'm not so sure I can thank you as perhaps I ought. It's only a bit of deferred business on hand, now, that might as well have been finished here and now."

"You are wrong there; you are wrong. Had you slain him you would never have gone out of this house alive."

"I have been threatened before."

She had placed her hand on his shoulder and was walking him away toward a corner, and no one undertook to interrupt her. Laurel Blossom was something of a queen there and so far her sovereignty had not been disputed.

"You must not undervalue the man. I fancy I know more about him than most people, and I assure you he has nothing of the slouch about him."

"I know; but look at my luck."

"That won't count in this case. I can tell you with just as much certainty as though he had confided in me that it was his intention to finish you from the moment he saw me speak to you."

"Are they all like that?" asked Jim, with a rueful smile.

"All what?"

"All your admirers."

"Hush; It is true Hall has been turning his face in my direction, and I have been as obstinately determined that the sun should not shine on him, but I am certain that there was something else behind it all. You must look out for yourself as you have never done before—and I believe you can do it."

CHAPTER XIX. CALLING THE TURN.

"Then you had better let me finish it on the spot. When they begin to hunt a stranger on sight he may as well have the agony over or jump the camp. For a dime I'd go out gunning now."

The sport was willing to believe that Laurel Blossom had made no mistake, and it was in his nature to fight back when crowded, and he had a chance.

"No, no! The time has not come yet. You do not know who are your friends, and if you wait a little you may help to unmask the villains behind it all."

"Friends! I have no friends here," answered Jim, bitterly.

"The man whose life I saved, probably, on the Flume, has been one of the first who tried to down me."

"Yes, you have, young man. You were building better than you knew when you risked your life for strangers, and came to the front in the hour of need. Here is one of your friends now."

She turned her shapely little head, and nodded with a smile at the man whom Harry Hall had called Mark Wharton.

He stepped forward with pantherish grace, and held out his hand.

"Genteel Jim, this is my very good friend, Marcus Wharton, who generally nods as I wink, but sometimes lets his judgment get away with him. You two shake."

"Shake it is," laughed the sport, smoothing out the frown which had been settling on his face.

"I seemed to strike a mighty rough deal when I took the trail to Doghole, but now I have met you two, perhaps the luck has turned."

"Don't get discouraged. I don't know that there are any worse towns than this, but for a man of your gait there can be lots of fun accumulated here."

"Fun? Excuse me. I'm getting too old for that. It is coin I am after in these late days."

"There's coin here, too. But you may have to read your title clear before you can get it. Laurel and I struck the camp about the same time, and have been pulling more or less together. Had I been on the spot I would have ordered Hall up on my own hand, but the line he took was only an excuse."

"Sure?"

"Dead sure. I saw him talking with a man who means murder when any one

stands in his way. He has it in for you, and you can be sure he will give you a lively hustle."

"And get as good as he gives."

"That goes without saying; but, all the same, it will be better to have some one to give you a few points on the game, and you can't have any one better than Laurel Blossom to do that same."

"And, sport, just one word—we can do you good, but there's a trifle of selfishness behind it. The same party that is after you will one day be camping on our trail if we don't head him off. We don't ask you to chip in on our side, but when we go in on yours we are turning the water on our own wheel. Sabbe?"

"I see; and I see, too, that I couldn't have found pards that would be more apt to stay with me till the last horn blows."

"Perhaps you will need them."

"I am willing to bet on that; but maybe you're undertaking a bigger contract than you know of. I escaped Judge Lynch once this evening by the skin of my teeth."

"Hush! This is no place to talk. We know. Just keep on at your own gait, and we'll give you warning when there are breakers in the road, and see you don't come to grief."

"Guardian angels, eh?" asked Jim, with a dry smile.

"All right. Flutter the wings on your shoulders; but I'll take mighty good care there don't any begin to sprout on mine."

"Look out that Hall don't come back at you in a different shape. When he gets under cover he makes a mighty queer-looking tough, and there's no one else in camp has got on to it. Say nothing, but watch out."

"I'm watching. And meantime?"

"Meantime? Oh, follow your nose. Come. We'll line up to the bar together, and then you can go tackle the tiger. I know that's what you're dying to do."

Although their conference in the corner had not been intruded on, and they had spoken in tones so low they could not be heard by outsiders, it was not likely the crowd would keep its distance much longer.

The advice was fairly good, and Genteel Jim accepted it.

"All right. I'll tackle the tiger then. If I didn't they might think I was a fraud. But I don't feel it in my bones that I'll be a winner to-night. If I can hold the animal even I'll be doing fairly well."

Laurel Blossom shook her head saucily in refusal, and the two men moved away together, dropping the air of exclusiveness as they went.

Mark Wharton had plenty of friends there, and they showed that they could be cordial to the sport as well.

"Look out for Jack," whispered one of them.

"He and Hall train together, and there was nothing said to bind him over. He skipped with his pard, but he may be back with a gang. We'll stand the rest off, but you will have to look out for him."

"I'm looking, and as long as I can raise the chips I'll see his hand, if I know it's an ace full."

The tiger which the Crystal Palace kept on hand was a full-sized beast; and one which the sport was hardly in condition to go against.

In spite of his reputation, he had some downs in the world as well as ups. Just now his finances were in none too prosperous a condition.

He left his lately made acquaintances in the outer room, and strolled up to the layout, wondering in what sort of a vein he would find himself.

It really meant a good deal to him, but there was no way to find out but to test it and see.

He threw a hundred dollars down for chips.

Ten dollars placed on the outside corner of the ten went when the eight lost, and another ten, flatfoot on the queen, was raked in by the bank.

Straight along through the deal followed the streak of luck with which he started in. Whether he played them flat, strung or coppered, it was all the same.

"Great Scott! A case card in the cue-box would split on the table if I strung it

to win," he muttered, as his last check went just before the final turn.

"Eight, seven, six," he continued, tossing down his derringer just inside of the seven, the butt toward the eight, and the muzzle to the six.

"It's evens and quit, and it says I've strung the pot for twenty-five."

He came in at the last minute, and at the Crystal everything went up to the limit. The dealer nodded and pulled the cards.

"Eight, seven, six, hits them right where they live!" exclaimed Laurel Blossom, who had come sliding up to his shoulder.

"You've got them on the run; now go for them close."

"It does look so that way," said the sport; "but as I'm even with the game, and have an idea how the thing runs, I'll just cash in and move on to the Silver Queen."

It was a sudden resolve, but it was made none too soon. As he dropped his coin carelessly in his pocket some one outside shouted:

"Eyes open now! Tulip is in here, somewhere, and it's a thousand to the man who takes him. Forward all."

The door opened, and in poured a band of men, each with a weapon in his hand.

At their head was the orator, and by his side stalked Mike Partridge.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MARSHAL FROM WEAVER CITY.

It is hardly worth while to describe the rescue of Partridge, for it had happened without any thrilling details.

His captors had treated him roughly, but without any attempt to do him permanent damage, and there was no great danger for him in the shaft into which he was lowered.

At present no noise he might make would be apt to attract attention, but there would be passers in the morning, whom his voice could attract.

As it happened, there were visitors that night. He heard voices, yelled lustily, and was drawn out.

He told his little story, and was too angry to make any reservations, and that was how he came to make his appearance at the Crystal Palace.

His coming created considerable excitement, for the words spoken outside were heard by the greater part of the crowd there, and were a surprise of the first water.

If Captain Tulip, chief of road-agents, was living, and in the room, the citizens of Doghole did not remember to have seen him, and the captain held his peace.

Surely there must be some mistake.

Men looked from one to the other in doubt, but pretty well certain that it was a false trail.

Genteel Jim was the only man there who might really be called a stranger, and whatever his other failings might be, he could scarcely be suspected of being a road-agent. Still, Soft Hand Cy had always maintained the reputation of generally getting something when he went for it.

"Guess you're a leetle off, Cy," said Billy Sayres, the proprietor, stepping forward to meet the party.

"Got it straight, Billy, and if any one is trying to climb out of a back window it's going to be mighty unhealthy for him."

"Honest, though. You are away off. We've the pedigree of every head that has been counted at the bar to-night, and there's been no one like Tulip to the front. I reckon Doghole would know enough to down him on sight if he showed up here."

Cy waved the discussion aside, and stared around the room, after a searching fashion.

His glance lingered an instant on Genteel Jim, and then went on to Laurel Blossom. There it rested a little longer, in evident admiration.

"Hardly going to swear that she's the man," laughed Billy.

"We're law abiding down hyar, but we'll draw the line right thar', if we have to fight for it."

"Oh, no, and I wouldn't blame you if you did. But a party who knows Tulip when he sees him watched him come in here, and there have been men all around the place to swear he never came out.

He's back in the bushes somewhere. If you're not objecting, we'll make the rounds."

Cy was in earnest. His men appeared to have had their stations told off beforehand, and while some guarded the avenues of exit, others made a circuit of the room or followed the marshal into the second hall.

The search through the house was without result, and Soft Hand Cy seemed puzzled.

He was debating whether to draw off his forces, when half a dozen men entered the room, at their head Leo Crandall.

"It's sometimes good play to fire at the pigeon and hit the crow," the latter said.

"There is a prisoner here waiting for you take him over to the city. We didn't care to urge the matter against him to-night for fear of stirring up Judge Lynch, but there's been a murder, and circumstances point strongly in his direction. I make the charges, and will point him out, depending on you to do the rest. The corpse is at my office."

"If that is straight goods you can rely on me, every time. Who was the gent killed?"

"Andrew Reever was his name, and though he was comparatively a stranger, it has been a heavy blow to Doghole—a good deal heavier than it so far knows. He came here to invest largely in business, having already an interest in some mining property."

"Not Andy?" exclaimed the marshal, recovering from what appeared a shock.

"Poor old pard! Why, I knew him of old. I'm camped right down on the trail if it's on his account you're asking help. Point out your man and I'll take him where they have law and ropes enough to satisfy a hog!"

"There is your man, then."

He pointed at Genteel Jim with the index finger of his right hand, but at the same time his left hand flew up and he held the sport covered.

Unconcerned as the sport was looking Crandall was taking no chances, and had there been the slightest movement toward assuming the aggressive, a shot would have followed.

"Roped me at last," laughed Jim, not seeming to be particularly troubled by the charge.

"I thought I had stuck a pin through that bit of foolishness, but it seems he's bound to come back on me. What do you suppose I would be shooting a man like Andy Reever from the bushes for? Nothing like that on my record heretofore, and there's nothing like it on my record now. If I didn't have a sneaking idea that Crandall believes what he says, I'd down him right now to show how my style of doing such things is apt to work."

"Steady, you! It was road-agents I was hunting, but I don't mind taking in anything of decent caliber that seems to come in the way. Hands up, and I'll promise you fair play!"

"Don't crowd me till you hear my platform. I don't doubt you are square goods, old man; but I'm not so sure of the gang that really took the trick. I'll give you my word to tote fair with you, but while I'm in Doghole I'm not putting up my hands, or handing over my tools, till I know the fellow who downed Reever isn't standing behind me. Take my word, or take my life. You've got to do one or the other."

The sport spoke as softly as Soft Hand himself, but the marshal knew he meant all he said. He knew something of how things went at times at Doghole, so he took no offense at what looked like a heavy bluff to others, who did not read human nature as thoroughly.

"All right, sport. I'll take care of you, and if you see I can't fill the contract you can take a hand in yourself."

Such an arrangement seemed unsatisfactory to more than one.

The charge had been a surprise to those who had been spending the evening at the Crystal, but there were murmurs of discontent at the privilege accorded the sport on the one hand, and on the other there were men who did not believe at all

in the charge, and would have been ready to speak out pretty strongly if the opportunity had been given.

"Do you know what sort of a man you are dealing with?" puffed the voice of Mr. Bangs, who came to the front.

"I object to that sort of way of doing business. Mr. Reever was in a way a partner of mine, and I feel it my duty to see his death does not pass unavenged."

"That's all right, my friend, and does you a heap of credit. I'm trying to help you the best I know how. If you want to lynch him I'm the wrong man to worry into your game. If you want the law to take him in regular course, keep on your linen. The man is in my hands, and I'm responsible."

"But what good will that do if he gets away?"

"You talk to me about that after the thing happens. This is a side issue, anyhow. It was Tulip I was after—if the wagon hadn't broke down with a lot of other bad luck, we would have been around this afternoon to catch him right in the line of his business. But we got the word too late. And now he seems to have sloped again. I'll have a watch out, but I reckon he's taken the alarm, and by this time is halfway over the mountain."

He looked at his watch carelessly, and then turned to Jim.

"You'll hardly want to racket around town to-night, and I'm not going to leave you out of sight till I land you safe in Weaver City. Reckon we had better adjourn to the Silver Queen."

"Suit yourself; only I'll be wanting to have an examination in the morning to make sure it's worth while to take me over there at all. I'm going with you because it may save some lives, and keep down a heap of nonsense, but when you look the ground over you won't be taking any more stock in Crandall's yarn than any other man of sense—so far as I come into it."

"One moment, pard," said Laurel Blossom, stepping forward, and Marcus Wharton stepped at her shoulder.

"If you think you need bail, Marc and I will stand for you—and Doghole knows us. You're a stranger here, but after the nerve you have shown we can swear you're white. And as for our fat friend there, you saved his life this afternoon, if accounts don't lie. If the man was forty times his partner, he ought to chip for fair play. When this thing is over the camp will have him down fine, if he's worth a dozen millions."

Laurel Blossom had her influence, and a strong party might have been formed, but the sport shrugged his shoulders.

"I've had all the racket I want for the day, and am yearning a heap more to bunk in than anything else. Much obliged, all the same, but if the marshal will see me to my little bed I'll let the rest of you figure it out to suit yourselves. Gents, all! I'm ahead of the house on the last turn I called, and it's my place to set 'em up. Take a drink with me, you that stand for fair play, and the present court will stand adjourned."

There was a lively rush for the bar, and two or three men were kept busy stringing the glasses along. Jim could not watch them all, and just as he was filling his glass Laurel Blossom whispered:

"Look out for drunks!"

CHAPTER XXI.

WILD WORK AT THE SILVER QUEEN.

It was a fair warning, well meant, but Genteel Jim gave no sign of having heard it, and turned up his tumbler with the rest of them.

Then the two, after a careless good night, passed out.

"Who is your friend, the lady sport?" asked the marshal, as they strode along.

"Can't prove it by me. She and her pard seem to be an institution here, and only an hour ago I came so near to lifting the top of his cocoanut that you can't guess; all through some of her ding-blasted foolishness. He's game from the ground up, though, and not a half bad sort. I'll hunt up his pedigree when I get time."

After that they were silent, and glancing back, the sport saw there were two or three shadows ditting in the rear.

Doghole had not altogether dropped him, and the men of Leo Crandall still kept on his trail.

Once in their room and the marshal turned sharply on Genteel Jim.

"Say, pard, if it's all the same to you, suppose you tell me what it's all about. I didn't want to mix in this thing, but it seemed the best I could do for you. Of course, all that yarn was rot?"

"Or worse."

"What's Crandall got against you, and what started him on such a track?"

"Reckon he's all right, but you never can tell. There's a corpse, right enough, and Andy Reever used to walk inside of it, but it was stiff before I laid eyes on it. There's a game somewhere, and it ought to be in your line. Can't you drop this road-agent business a bit and take hold of the drag-rope? You might pull off a big thing."

"And who have I got to buck against?"

"That fat man for one. I saved the life of the ungrateful wretch this very afternoon, and they say he's worth a million. Then there's that Crandall, and the gang at the Crescent, and I don't know how many more, all hanging together, and I wouldn't wonder if you had to sift them all over before you got down to the real bedrock of the situation. It may have just been a clear case of murder for coin, for his pockets were inside out; but it looks more to me as if there were big guns behind it."

"And there's some money to account for it all?"

"Some money, and a girl, and a blind man; and another dead man; and there's lots of other things. I haven't been here long, but I've learned a heap. Maybe you had better go down and investigate a bit while the scent is warm. You'll find me here when you get back. Just now I'm going to play I'm sleepy. Good night."

He had been talking in a tone little above a murmur, and yawning from time to time. Now he threw himself upon the bed, adjusted himself to a comfortable position, with his eyes turned so he could easily keep the window in view, and said nothing more.

"For a man under the shadow of the rope you do carry a heap of nerve. If I don't find anything to hinder, perhaps I'll take your advice, but I'll put a man here to watch out a bit. I don't trust your gents in the background."

"A—awl righ'!" drawled the sport, loud enough to be heard through the opening door; and soon his long-drawn breathing could have been heard to the other end of the hall had not Soft Hand Cy closed the door behind him.

As has already been more than guessed, Genteel Jim was no stranger to the marshal, and knew he could rely on his word. In fact, within five minutes, there was a low tap, and as Jim never moved or answered, the door opened and a man came silently in and seated himself in the nearest chair, which he tipped back against the wall.

He was one of Cy's deputies, and was responsible for the safety of the sport while the chief was away.

Soft Hand Cy tarried over his return, and an hour or so went by.

As a result, there were two men sleeping in the room instead of one, and the house had settled to the quiet which belonged after midnight.

Then, if any one had been watching the window of the room they would have seen a glare outside which momentarily brightened, and then, from the direction of the Crystal Palace, arose a shout:

"Fire! Fire!"

After that the noise of running feet, and more shouting, and people tumbling out of their beds and hastily making an exit from the building.

The fire had started at the rear, in or about the kitchen, but the wind was roaring from that side of the house, sweeping flames over the main part. It was a bad time to waste many more minutes

in slumber. The fire would forge straight through the tinder-box of a house with the strength and rapidity of a tornado going through a forest.

There was no nonsense about Genteel Jim's slumbers, when he did settle down, though if the truth had been known, he was awake when the marshal's aid entered the room. A fly could hardly have stepped into the apartment without his knowing.

But shortly afterward he allowed tired nature to seek her sweet restorer, and never heard the alarm which startled so many, though a little later the hurrying footsteps in the house brought him to himself.

He was in no particular danger, since he and his baggage could go through the window before there was time to take a second breath. He remained quiet for an instant, trying to sum up in his mind what had happened.

A cry, shriller, more frightened, than the others, reached his ears, and he knew without telling it came from a woman's lips. It brought him from his bed at the same time the deputy sprang from his chair, and standing in the middle of the floor looked somewhat wildly around. The room was already filling with smoke, and the door was opening softly.

Jim's hand flew up as a man slipped into the room, but the deputy stood between them.

The sight of him gave the intruder a shock, but it did not cause him to hesitate. With a fierce bound he leaped forward, striking with a knife, and then leaped back into the hall, closing the door again behind him.

It was done so quickly the sport had no time to cover the distance between them before the man had vanished. Between the darkness and the smoke he might have passed for but a fleeting shadow had it not been for the specimen of red handiwork left on the floor.

There was no time to hesitate now, and pursuit was out of the question. The sport could hear the roaring of the flames, and it might even happen that they would reach the man in the hall. For himself, he hastily caught up the poor fellow on the floor, unmindful of the broad, splotchy stain of red that spread over his breast as he clasped the shivering body.

A step or two he took to the window.

The Silver Queen was a pretentious building, inasmuch as it boasted of two stories; and the room of the sport was in the second one.

Right below the window was the roof of the porch, and on this he bounded, still holding the body of the wounded man in his arms.

The glare from the building made things almost as bright as day, and as he advanced to the edge of the roof he heard at no great distance the crack of a pistol, and simultaneously felt the body in his arms give a quick start and quiver, as from sudden pain.

Without a doubt the bullet had been meant for him, and was sent by one of the watchers who had been put on his trail. How soon would another one come?

"If they don't get my scalp it won't be for want of trying," was his thought as he threw himself down flat.

"A fellow who could go over the side of the Flume without a scratch is hardly going to stick up here to be shot at," and with the deputy still in his arms he rolled off the roof without much thought of what might be below.

Fortunately for him—though there was one man who was of a different opinion about that—he lit on something softer than the steps. He had what for some persons might have been an ugly fall; but in a minute was on his feet.

He had landed on top of Hiram Bangs, who was making his exit from the house in a destitution of clothing which showed about where he was when the fire started him.

"Murder!" he shouted, scrambling up from the ground.

"Murder! He tried to kill me! Don't let him get away!"

Some one else took up the cry.

"It's that infernal sport again! And what's this? This way, men! This way!"

The body of the deputy lay there, just as the fall had shaken it out of the arms of the sport, and the ghastly wound in his breast was uppermost, while the blood was slowly welling out and making a pool by his side.

"It's one of Soft Hand Cy's deputies, and the sharp has murdered him, trying to get away!"

And then, in spite of every other element of excitement, there was a rush and a crush, and again Genteel Jim was in fair line to stand a fight for his life with the town against him.

CHAPTER XXII.

THROUGH THE FLAMES.

There was no question but what the two bodies dropped from the roof locked in each other's arms, and the theory started was not an improbable one. If the deputy had been actually dead the hanging of the sport might have come right along as the proper corollary, in spite of the sudden appearance of the marshal from Weaver City to take a hand in, and who shouted as he came up:

"Go slow there! That's my prisoner you are barking over, and when I once close my fingers on a chap I never let go till the law says so."

"Confound the law!" screamed Hiram Bangs.

"He has almost broken my neck, and has killed another man. If you can't do better than that we'll believe you of the trouble altogether."

He spoke like an excited man, who did not know what he was saying, but he hit the mood of the crowd. Cy was an ugly one to deal with, yet, with a little more urging, that might be forgotten.

"Blame it, men! if I can see what's in the game; it was just the other way. I rapped a fellow over the head over yonder for taking a shot at them—and poor Bob seems to have caught his bullet. You find the knife that made this cut, and you'll know it didn't belong to the sport, either. Get a doctor here, quick. He isn't going to die. After that, we'll see who tried to take the trick."

Cy had hastily made an examination, and found that though the cut was a terrible one, it did not seem to have done more than lay open the whole outside of the man's breast, not reaching an absolutely vital point, while the bullet wound in the shoulder was comparatively trifling.

And then, looking at his head, he found a cut there which might have come from the fall, but which looked as though he had been also struck a hard blow with some heavy weapon.

Cy was right in that last idea.

While he was feeling the injury the man came somewhat to his senses.

"They tried to bust in on him, but I stood 'em off well es I could. The sport was asleep."

"Did you see him?"

"No, but he came from the hall. Where's the—what's wrong?"

He spoke weakly and closed his eyes. Faintness was coming over him again, and he became helpless in the arms of the marshal.

"Here, we must get him out of this!" exclaimed Jim in the lull which had been caused by the anxiety of the crowd to hear the words of the wounded man.

"The fellow came through the door, no doubt after me, and mounted him on sight. Then he dodged back. I'll tell you the story later on. There's something else to look after here."

He gave a quick spring, which carried him through the ranks of men which stood in his way.

"What is it?" he asked, sharply, catching Zebulon Vallance by the shoulder.

The blind man was standing full in the glare of the light, wringing his hands, and no one was paying any attention to him.

He turned his eyes on the sport with an unmeaning stare.

"My daughter! Dora! I have lost her again. Where is she? Have you seen her?"

Like a flash came back to the sport the memory of the scream he had heard before making his exit from his room. He could not leave the wounded man at the time, but he wondered how he could have forgotten it afterward.

He looked up at the blazing building. Could the girl be in it?

He paused just long enough to remember where her room had been, and then dashed through the doorway into the pall of smoke, finding the stairway by instinct, and mounting it in four or five bounds.

From the head of the stairs to the room of Dora Vallance was a matter of but three or four steps; and lucky for him it was that he plunged against the door without mistake or delay.

Already it seemed as though he must choke and strangle with the smoke, while the hot breath of flame which came tearing up almost to his face would have wrapped him in fire.

As he struck against the door his hand fell upon the latch, which he tried.

A bolt seemed to be shot on the inside, and without standing on ceremony he hurled his whole weight against the panels, which gave way before him, and he was precipitated headlong into the room.

Gathering himself up, he glared around, at the same time calling for the young lady; but could see no one, and there was no answer to his shout.

Hastily he felt over the bed, which was right by the door. Though the room was filling fast with smoke he was satisfied it was vacant of living being besides himself. An open window suggested she had made her escape after all; and he went out without ceremony by the same avenue.

That side of the house appeared to have no attractions for the crowd, since it was entirely deserted. Jim glanced around, but there were no traces of Dora. Then he walked rapidly around the blazing house; and found the crowd was staring up at the windows, while Soft Hand Cy and the wounded man had disappeared. He could see nothing of Zebulon Vallance, either.

No one paid any attention to the sport; and he was not particularly anxious the state of affairs should be changed. There was nothing to keep him there, he probably knew as much about what was going on as he wanted, and he did not care to meet Vallance, if by any chance Dora was perishing in the flames. It was too late now to save her, and he turned away, uncertain where he had best go to pass the night in quiet.

If Doghole got started on the rampage, even the marshal from Weaver City could hardly help him, and the persistency with which the people were raking up suspicions against him began to make him tired.

Not knowing what better to do he simply strolled off, unnoticed, and without particular aim. Fortunately, the Silver Queen stood so much by itself there was little danger of other buildings taking fire, and if there was time to save any furniture from the conflagration there were plenty left behind to take advantage of the opportunity. It looked to him as though he was lucky in making his own escape.

Yet he could not help but think it might be his duty to make sure of what had become of the young lady. Save for the fact that they had been fellow travelers, and that he had played something of a part in the matter of her rescue at the Flume, she was a perfect stranger to him; yet somehow their lives had begun to blend, and if she still lived he thought it would not be surprising if he saw a good deal more of her.

As for Bangs, he had heard of him. A cold-blooded schemer, and a man with a million, he was a cruel enemy, and if the sport and he were to run counter to each other in Doghole the mine magnate was not a man to be despised, even by Genteel Jim. He could not be shot and done with, for though having a certain wicked courage of his own, Bangs had never been known to exchange shots with any one.

If he was up to any such games as the sport suspected, it might be hard to checkmate him.

And then, suddenly, there came into the mind of Genteel Jim the question:

"Who killed Andrew Reever?"

"It was as pretty a plan to push the murder over on my shoulders as ever was hatched up—and it looks as though, sooner or later, they calculated on elevating me as the boss of that job. If they do, they'll have to get a move on; and if they don't, I'll come back at them hard before I'm done with 'em."

In some such way ran his thoughts, but before he had decided on anything he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CAPTAIN TULIP KEEPS THE GATE.

Dora Vallance was a young lady of considerable beauty, and a good deal of courage. When it was first decided to go down to Doghole and look after the mining interests which, by the death of her brother, she thought she had fallen heir to, she had no idea of taking her father along. His affliction was such that, though in fair health and strength, he would be more of a hindrance than a protection.

He had not always been blind, but some years before his eyesight began to fail, and one day on waking he found that it appeared to have left him altogether, though there were some peculiarities about the malady which Dora did not thoroughly understand. It might even be that his case was not entirely hopeless, though poverty kept him from testing the resources of science to their utmost.

Years before there had been a falling out between her father and her brother, which perhaps accounted for the fact that one day she received the communication announcing his death, and that he had left her heir to what property he might die possessed of.

The death of the young man caused everything of bitterness to vanish from the father's heart, if indeed it had not left him long before. He insisted on journeying to the side of his son's grave, and by making a few more sacrifices it was possible for him to go.

Until they neared Doghole the journey had been made without any striking incident, and the two had kept so well to themselves that almost at that time they had made but one traveling acquaintance.

It may be a surprise to the reader to learn that the sole acquaintance made in the earlier stages of the trip was Andrew Reever.

He was a singular sort of a man, who turned out on intimacy just as it happened, and was on the way back from a flying visit to the East when chance threw the two in his way.

Impelled by some unknown impulse, he took an interest in the two, and before long was in possession of their history.

He was well acquainted with the locality whither they were going, and gave them some good advice, though he confessed he had never met the younger Vallance.

"There are mines, and there are other mines," he drawled, with his head back and his eyes looking into vacancy.

"As like as not the property the young man left was worthless. If it was not it will be a miracle if you do not find, when you get there, that it has been jumped."

As that was a technicality father and daughter did not entirely understand, he explained its meaning, and something of the laws, written and unwritten, in regard to mines and mining.

"Do not mention my name," he added, "but if you find when you get there that there is a chance of the mine being of value, write me, and I will help you out."

At the end of their journey over the trunk line they stopped over for a day to rest a little, and so lost sight of Andrew Reever.

When they again saw him, he was entering the stage with Hiram Bangs, and then he looked over them as though they were perfect strangers. It was Bangs who gave them attention now, and it was not long before he had wormed from them every

item they had doled out to Reever—and more.

There was another passenger who took an interest in them, and that was the gaunt, elderly female, who so freely expressed her opinion of Hiram Bangs. She said little directly to them, but she heard and thought a good deal.

She was going down to Doghole to rejoin her husband, who was working in the mines near there, and intended to give the two a thorough warning before parting from them. If she did not do it exactly after the fashion at first intended, it was because the accident materially interfered.

Though Dora came up out of the gulch at the side of the Flume with wit, courage and strength, it must not be supposed she suffered no shock nor bodily injury. When the reaction came on she was as weak as a child, and when she was carried up to her bed she looked as though she might have just passed through a severe spell of sickness.

Yet there was nothing serious about that.

She was young and had a vigorous constitution. The chances were that by morning she would be about again, almost as well as ever.

What she needed was rest and sleep, and she prepared to take a full share of them.

For a long time she lay with her eyes closed, but finding it impossible to do more than sink into a troubled doze, from which she quickly awoke with a start, as she imagined she was again sliding over the rocky wall of the Flume.

Her father watched over her, as well as he could, having at hand a glass of water and some sort of medicine which the doctor had left for her. He remained very quiet, but even his presence seemed to irritate her, and at a hint from her he went to his own room, which was adjoining and directly opposite to the one occupied by the sport.

After that the house quieted down. Men went off to the saloons or to their beds, and Dora at last drifted into a sound sleep.

She did not hear the marshal come in with his willing prisoner, and the first bit of consciousness she had was when she suddenly found herself fighting for what seemed to be life with some strong and unknown foe.

The room appeared to be in darkness, and a weight was settling down on her breast, while breathing appeared to be almost an impossibility.

Something soft was being pressed down on her face, with above all a sickening, sweet odor, which told her of chloroform.

It was then she gave the scream which reached the ears of Genteel Jim.

After that, she lapsed into unconsciousness, and knew nothing more until, sometime later, she was revived by the cool night air, and found herself well beyond the limits of Doghole.

For a time she had struggled fiercely, but that cry was the expiring flicker of her resistance, and she lay so still on her bed that the masked man who bent above her almost fancied he had gone a step farther than intended, and extinguished life altogether.

Another man was in the room, but he was bending over the little hand-trunk which sat in one corner of the room, hastily examining the contents, which were being pulled out and scattered over the floor.

"Reckon I got 'em," he said, "but ther boss wants ter make sure on sick things he'd orter kim' along an' pick 'em over hisself. How yer makin' it?"

The answer was stopped in the midst of it by the sudden entrance of a third ruffian, who came bursting through the door and who shot the bolt behind him.

"Took ther trick like a charm, but hed ter work fur it," was his exclamation. "You wants ter git a hussel on er ther' may be some necks stretched yit. Snatch her, pard! Don't stand a moonin'!"

They were certainly bold villains, but that was the kind to flourish at Doghole. They seemed to have calculated everything to a nicely.

Though there was a possibility of there

being spectators to the exit, the chances were that the attention of everybody would be attracted to the other side of the house, and if they were seen it would be hard to say they were not rescuing a young lady who had been overpowered by terror and the smoke.

First, one coolly slid down to the ground, then another, and between them they received Dora from a third.

Fate favored them. Unobserved, they stole away, bearing between them the unconscious girl. Eyes may have rested on them, but if so it was in an unmeaning way. The farther they went the less was the danger.

The glare of the burning building lit up the immediate vicinity, but at a little distance seemed to make the night doubly dark.

The three men slipped along with their senseless burden, occasionally making a muttered affidavit that they were earning their money. The weight was no such great things to be divided among three, but it was awkward to handle under the circumstances.

As one of them stumbled he swore savagely:

"Ef Jet don't turn up soon with ther cayuses I'll be fur shootin' him, an' them too. Might ez well b'in a half mile nearer town."

"Don't you worry 'bout Jet. He's standin' jest whar' ther boss tolle him ter stan', an' ef he come nearer he might git a story tolle him when he gits ter headquarters. I ain't bettin' thar' ain't someun' watchin' ov us now, an' takin' in what you're a talkin'. That's ther boss's style."

The retort seemed to have a quieting effect, and nothing more was said until a low hail from the darkness on the side of the trail caused an immediate halt.

Jet was there, with four horses. To mount was but the work of a moment, and then they went plunging through the night with more speed and better comfort.

"It's slugs thet count in this world," said one of the men, with a long breath.

"But it'd take a power ov 'em ter bring me up ter that rack ag'in."

He seemed to think the danger over, but it had just begun. A pistol shot flamed out ahead of them, which brought down the horse of the leader, while a harsh voice cried out:

"Halt, thar', an han's up! Ther day's work ain't over, an' Captain Tulip are keepin' this hyar gate."

CHAPTER XXIV.

HIRAM BANGS AT HOME.

The flames from the Silver Queen were shooting up merrily, and there was no chance whatever to save the building from destruction.

What furniture could be removed had already been dumped out in the street, and there was nothing more to do but stand around and watch that the fire did not communicate with the nearest buildings, which, fortunately, were at some little distance.

There was no general move to look for the sport, though if he had not slipped away when he did there might have been more trouble.

A rumor had, indeed, started that he had lost his life in the burning hotel, though it was not generally credited.

Bangs had disappeared almost as quietly.

He was apparently ashamed of the spectacle he had made of himself, and besides, he had something more to talk about. Long before he had been missed at the fire he was seated once more in the office with Leo Crandall; and from the looks of the two men they had got right down to business.

"It's no use, Crandall. We have got into the chute, and we must expect to go along with a rush, and stand the chances. If luck don't play we'll come out all right. If it does—I'm sorry for our necks."

"Don't see it. A little sharp play for a mine is no hanging matter; and if there's

no great body of ore in sight we'll be more likely to be laughed at than hung."

"So you think. You are one of the goody-goody sort of rascals, who wants all the work done by his pards, and then expects to crawl out if a wreck comes by, saying it wasn't your doing. I begin to suspect the game won't turn out worth the candle; but at the same time we've got our hands dealt and we've got to play them through."

"You mean?"

"I mean I was doubting this Genteel Sport from the moment I laid eyes on him; and now that the marshal from Weaver City has chipped in with him we have got to down them or they will down us. It was a bold game to try, but that was the reason I thought it would work. Curse the town! I thought they would lay down against the collar without any urging, but they were afraid of his guns, and it wouldn't do for us to get any farther front."

"It wouldn't have been safe, and that was a fact. He dropped to us as the moral force of the crowd, and would have shot at the fall of the hat. The crowd had as much nerve as we had."

"That may be so, but if I had been as handy with the tools as you are I would have drilled him, sure. We took big chances when it wa'n't done; and I'm not sure we will win."

Bangs spoke as though he might be discouraged, and stared thoughtfully at his partner, who in turn began to wear a troubled look.

"Speak it out. There is something more in all this than I know of—and I thought it was bad enough before. What have you been doing?"

"What have I been doing? Bless your soul, what have we all been doing? Guess we are in it far enough to sink or swim in the same soup. We have been killing Andy Reever, and it's ten to one the Genteel Sport is on to it, with the Soft Hand a good second. Those two men have got to retire."

"Andy Reever? We—you?"

There could be no doubt about the genuine surprise of Crandall at the announcement. He showed it all over, and shuddered as Bangs gave a hideous little laugh.

"Kind of strikes you where you live, eh? Don't exactly see how the partnership is to be dissolved, do you? I'll own up it was so near an accident that if it hadn't been done on purpose there might have been a chance to crawl out of it. It was the sport I was really after, and I was fool enough to think I could get them both."

"But where—how—I don't see that I—" "Of course. You had nothing to do with it. But all the same, if I am found out you will hang. Pards we are, and I'll take mighty good care you share in that part of the assets. Now, you get down out of the clouds, quit mooning, and come to business. What are we going to do about it? If I know anything about the matter we have got to have them both."

"But—good Heavens! Do you mean two more murders to cover up the first?"

"That's about the way it usually runs. When Doghole gets a man of capital, who goes in for the general development of the town, it must accept his vagaries. And when that capital is pretty much all on paper he has to twist around lively until he gets his footing sure."

"But if suspicion once begins to come our way, what are you going to do about it?"

"Suspicion won't come our way. What we can't unload on this sport is going to be credited to Captain Tulip, bless his soul; and when we work the three out of sight altogether, and the game with the young lady is finished, we will simply be so many thousands ahead, and have a chance to go on to something better."

"Something worse, you mean! Let us give the thing up. As long as there was no bloodshed in it except what came in the natural course of events I didn't mind; but I never shot a man from behind, and I didn't even try it when I thought that sport had killed poor Andy. It's the reason, I suppose, I don't shoot you."

"Ha, ha! Not a bit of it. You haven't the nerve. That is all. You are no better than the rest of us. You have boomed me up to Doghole, and now you have all got to take me as you find me. There'll be no drawing out this side of the divide; and if you want to go over, say the word and go you shall—here and now."

Bangs seemed to know his man like a book, for he never once hesitated, and as he finished speaking trained a revolver on him with a swift certainty hardly to be expected after his speech a little before.

The sight of the pistol barrel steadied the nerves of the listener. He drew himself up with an effort. It was the shock of the unexpected revelation which had broken him up, and in the face of present danger he could be a cooler and a wickeder man.

"Wait. You have asked me what I am going to do about it. It is not my say. You have been running this thing and will have to keep in the lead. Show your hand and I'll say whether I can play to it."

"Spoken like a man of sense. I can guess about what move will be made in the morning, and Captain Tulip will be ready to checkmate it. Very bloodthirsty sort of fellow is this Tulip, and I wouldn't wonder if he downed our friends for keeps."

"And then?"

"As that same Tulip has the young lady in his fingers he will hold on to her until he finds out what she knows about the strike at the Dandy Belle. I suspect it would also be a good plan to interview the old man during the absence of the sport, and see what arrangements I can make with him."

"After that?"

Bangs scraped his chin thoughtfully. It reply.

was at least a minute before he made a

"It must depend. Perhaps Vallance can put up enough collateral to induce me to buy the girls from the outlaws. Perhaps it will seem best to simply lead out a rescuing party. Whether it would find the girl dead or alive would be an uncertainty on which I cannot now decide. It will be a startler whichever way it turns out."

"But Tulip may have something to say to that. He takes his own notion, sometimes, and if you want to deal with him you must expect him to be holding the long end of the string."

Bangs grinned.

"Don't you worry about Tulip. I can manage that part of the affair. The question is whether it will be safe to let the gang go when we get the girl, or whether it would be better to drop them on sight. I like to do the square thing, but I'm not much on running risks, and by the time it is all done there will be several who might be able to say a heap."

"And when we get through with it all what will it foot up as to the profits?"

"Got to that at last, have you? Ha! ha! For an elastic conscience it's the all-important thing. Couldn't tell you at this asking, because we haven't yet made out what was done with the pocket, or how large it was, but I count on getting away with the Dandy Belle altogether, and you ought to have an idea of how that is going to pan out. When we sink down to the lower drift, and take the world in, there ought to be enough in sight to give us a brace of nice little fortunes—and my advice will be to take them and leave."

"Sell out, eh?"

"About that, though I wouldn't mind having a little stock left as a flyer. If we don't rake in dividends it won't be much loss; and if we do it ought to be that much clear. It's settled, is it? You and I are still on the same level?"

Crandall reached out his hand. He had almost forgotten his fears, and altogether his repugnance. To him there seemed too much in sight to be squeamish.

"All right, then. I've got everything laid out as far as it will go for the present, and as the Queen has gone back on us we may as well bunk in here for the rest of the night. We want to be up and doing in the morning."

CHAPTER XXV.

TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS RANSOM.

The next morning there was a heap of ruins in the center of Doghole, and spread around it were several acres of curiosity.

The starting of the fire had been so uncertain that it might have passed for an accident; but there were other incidents which were something else.

For instance:

The conflagration proved a benefit to a man by the name of Johnson, who kept the only other establishment in the town which could at all be dignified by the name of hotel.

The next morning he had an overflow, and the resources of his second-class establishment were taxed to the utmost in providing accommodations for the houseless boarders of the late Silver Queen.

Soft Hand Cy made this house his headquarters; Vallance had been taken thither; and even Genteel Jim found his way there after a long doze in the open air.

He and the marshal held a conference in regard to the disappearance of Dora.

There was an opinion abroad that she had perished in the flames; and the people were only waiting for the embers to cool to search around for bones.

The sport thought differently, and the marshal was about of his way of thinking.

Zebulon Vallance hardly knew what to think.

He said little about himself. He had been wakened up by the alarm, and in confusion staggered or groped his way out into the hall. Of one thing he was confident. A man went from the hall into the room occupied by Genteel Jim.

After that he seemed to know nothing more until he found himself outside making inquiries for his daughter.

If the marshal had any doubts about the correctness of the story told by the sport the evidence of Zebulon would have added some weight to it; while Bob Jackson, the wounded deputy, would have satisfied him altogether.

Jackson was not going to die, though he was very weak and uncomfortable. He was a man, reliable and cool in the face of danger, and told his story over again, though almost as briefly as he had done when Cy was bending over him in front of the burning building.

He was positive Genteel Jim was sleeping on the bed, just as he had thrown himself down before the marshal left him.

Alarmed by the noise, Bob had started up in time to confront a man who rushed into the room.

Then came a stroke of the knife, followed by a heavy blow, and he sank to the floor unconscious. As for the rest, he felt sure the story told by Jim was the true one, and that he was actually indebted to the sport for his life.

It was pretty hard to get up a lynching bee on account of a man who was still very much alive, and who professed profound affection for the assassin, so there was little danger of that matter being pressed; and after a little examination into the death of Reever, the chief from Weaver City thought that if matters there could be held under consideration for a little the charge would hardly be pressed against the sport. The longer public opinion had time to cool, the more easy it would be to convince people that they would have to look further if they wanted to find the murderer.

"You can't do much good, Jimmy," was his parental advice.

"Keep out of the crowd to-day, and by the time night comes on they will have forgotten all about you, unless some one stirs them up. And I want to keep an ear open to hear who is doing that little thing. It may give me the clew to swear to. And you can bet I'm not going out of Doghole till I know something more about who killed Andy Reever, and what for; and who put a knife into poor Bob. I'm betting the same gang ran both games."

"And how about the girl?"

"That goes without saying. I'll find her if she's above ground; and if she ain't, I'll run up a tombstone for good luck."

"Good thing you got your crowd with

you. You won't be short of men, anyhow."

"No; but after they have nosed around to find a trail for me I'm going to send them all home; and I'm not sure but what I'll go myself. This is mighty interesting work, that has to be touched lightly. Captain Tulip can keep. He's not a bad sort for a road-agent, though I'd like to corral that thousand well enough."

A knock at the door of the closet-like room where the two were holding their conference caused them to start, but it turned out it was Zebulon Vallance, who came feeling his way.

"You are an officer of the law," he began.

"Can't you do something for me? Can't you help me? It was murder last night. It was murder; and some one did it knowing why. But I do not understand it. What is it all about?"

The old man was pretty well broken down, and his eyes looked red, as though he had been weeping. From what he said it was plain he believed Dora had perished in the flames.

"It is by no means certain your daughter is dead," replied Cy, with a good deal of pity in his tones.

"Jim, here, has an idea that she will be heard of soon, and I have several men out already looking for a trail. Everything we can do will be done, and you want to keep up your courage."

"How can I when it seems there is nothing but murder here? First, Zachariah went; and they tell me he was killed in the mine and buried somewhere among the hills. I do not know if I can find his grave."

"Then, Andrew Reever—who had promised he would be my friend if I came to need one down here—was shot. They claim it was this man here who did the deed; but I know better. And now Dora is missing, and I do not know if I shall believe what they tell me. Is it all on account of the accursed mine?"

"You may have hit it there, but you don't want to ask that question around town too often where the good people can hear you. They might think you were hinting a heap sight too much. Try and hold yourself together till I can look the ground over. By the way, who has that same mine now?"

The blind man shook his head.

"It ought to be Dora's, for it was left to her in the last paper my poor boy ever wrote; but I know nothing more about it. She came to find out, and to look after his grave, and see something that—had—been—his."

His voice died away in a sob, and Jim took up the talking for him.

"I don't know much more about it than he does, but I can guess better how the thing is running. I wouldn't gamble much on my authority, but I've been informed the claim had been jumped, and that Bangs was behind the operation. How far his hand shows is more than I can say."

"Who told you?" asked Cy, looking up shrewdly.

"Well, if the truth must be known, it was that same Captain Tulip you were hunting for. And he didn't seem to love Bangs for a cent."

"That's an honest sort of a confession, anyway; but what in thunder were you chinning with him about that he grew so confidential? You'll get yourself into a snarl yet if you don't have a guardian appointed."

To explain matters, Jim hastily ran over the history of the affair on the Flume, of which the marshal hitherto had heard only an expurgated account.

Cy heard and was indignant.

"And you've been letting his corpse lie there all this time? He's only a road-agent, but if he went over the rocks trying to save a girl's life it's not the square thing to give his stiff to the wolves."

"Don't fret yourself about that. He wanted me to keep dark, and I did it. And if he went into the Crystal Palace half a dozen hours later he wasn't killed very bad."

"Gammon! You know that was all a

mistake; and a tough old rowing up I gave the fool who made it."

"Maybe it wasn't a mistake after all. Remember, I am not saying because I don't know; and it ain't a betting matter because I can't prove it on him. If it was I'd take even money; and maybe make a pile."

"Well, if Doghole don't hang you it won't be because it oughtn't!" exclaimed the marshal, emphatically.

"You are off color, here, anyhow, and if you get to monkeying with the road-agents yet they will elongate your neck, sure."

Genteel Jim gave a pleasant little laugh, and then shrugged his shoulders. The prospect seemed to have no terrors.

"We'll finish this matter with Bangs, and then discuss the subject. With two-thirds of the town to nod as he winks it will be a stiff enough fight, and the taste we've had shows the style they are going to run it on. Pistols all 'round, and steel when lead won't do."

"And the worst of it is, I can't bring you too far to the front. Look after the old man a little while I go out to view the ground."

By no possible chance could Zebulon Vallance have found two better men to stand his friends, and he seemed to know it.

He sat with the sport and told him something of his past history, but it did not seem to have much bearing on matters here. At least, it furnished him occupation, and he was almost in a pleasant frame of mind when the marshal hustled in:

"Say, old man! Your daughter is alive, but she's in the hands of Captain Tulip. He's sent in words to that effect, and demands ten thousand dollars ransom!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE AMBUSH IN THE GORGE.

It was hard to tell whether or not the news the marshal brought was an agreeable surprise. From all accounts Captain Tulip was a singular sort of an outlaw, who would one day feast a traveler needing assistance, and the next day cut his throat if there was a dollar in the operation.

The road-agent had hinted something of the kind when he talked with Vallance by the side of the Flume, yet even after the warning then given it was hard to see how he could have made such a bald mistake. There was nothing about the appearance of Zebulon Vallance which could make any one believe he was able to pay such a sum; and if the road-agent had any acquaintance at all with the private affairs of the man he should have known that even the tenth part of the amount was far beyond his means.

Doghole was much worked up over the matter, because it had an idea that Tulip seldom made a miss, and that if he was asking ten thousand dollars for the release of Miss Vallance it must be because coin was plenty in the family.

If that was the case a great mistake had been made when the new-comers were allowed to drop out of sight after a feeble attempt at reception on account of the accident which had befallen the young lady.

The town cared more for coin than it did for heroism, and had been up to the present time more exercised about the amount of money Hiram Bangs intended to spend in the development of the Crescent than over the adventures, however thrilling they might be, of a girl who could otherwise profit them nothing.

In some unknown way the rumor started that Dora had dropped into the hands of the road-agents even before what seemed an authoritative announcement she was there and held for ransom.

Soft Hand Cy had heard of it the first thing after leaving the old man, and had traced it pretty near its source.

It seems a couple of miners had seen the fire at the Silver Queen, and had gone out to get a better view. Though keeping themselves out of sight, they had an indistinct view of the four men who were the captors of Dora, and the burden that was carried in front of one of them.

They did not understand what they saw then, but when they visited the town the next morning it struck them it might have been Captain Tulip and some of his men taking away the young lady as a prisoner.

That was the story, as Cy got it, and it was as near to the truth as such stories ever are. Afterwards, when a note, stuck in a forked stick, was found just outside of the town, addressed to Zebulon Vallance, the finder did not have any hesitation in reading its contents. Though the note was carefully folded again when it was placed in Cy's hands for delivery to the rightful owner, its contents were already spread over the city, and comments were being made accordingly.

Jim uttered a low, long-drawn whistle.

"I have to wait till we make it, I reckon, and I'm not sure there's that much floating around loose in all Doghole. Better send the man word he's a fool and he'd better try it over again. Now, if it was Bangs he had salted down there would be some sense in it. Say, let's go out and shoot him, anyhow."

"Who? Bangs?"

"No. Tulip, of course. Just for being a blasted fool."

"Don't be excited. I'll tell you what I am going to do. I'm going out to Zack's old claim and see whether it would amount to much to put up as collateral. Something tells me that is the hub 'round which this whole thing revolves."

"My idea exactly, and if you think I can trust myself with the lambs of Doghole, I'll be going along. Perhaps, by this time popular opinion is not so strong in favor of a rope."

"Go along, by all means. I've found a guide that I reckon is reliable, and it won't be much of a journey."

There was something to be said to Zebulon, but with two such hopeful friends to encourage him, he began to understand the situation had improved, and did not object to leaving matters for the present in their hands.

The two went out on the street together as coolly as though the town had not, two or three times, the night before, threatened to rise en masse and execute the handsome young sport.

The journey before them was not long, and Cy preferred to take it on foot.

They strolled out of town without having to indicate their intentions, and found their guide waiting for them just where he had told the marshal in advance that he could be looked for.

"Dick Dunlop," said Cy, with a sort of introductory nod.

"He's posted on the claims out in the neighborhood of the Crescent, and is going to show us all about them."

"Dunlop, eh? Any relation to the lady who came down in the stage?"

Dick Dunlop was squarely built.

In fact, he was so square that he was about as broad as he was tall, and his little gray eyes peered out over much-puffed cheeks, and under the longest and heaviest eyebrows the sport had ever seen. He had a beard, too, which was well grizzled with gray, the hairs of which were coarse, stiff, and stuck straight out without a curl or kink.

At the question he puffed out his cheeks still farther, and almost closed his heavy eyelids.

"I sh'd sedgest."

"Ah. Youngest orphan?"

"Oldest husband, and be blamed to yer."

"Yes. If there is anything going I generally get blamed for it. I see the family resemblance, however. Pious yourself?"

Dick gave a specimen of his piety and turned around. He did not care to waste the time in chaff.

"Sounds reliable, don't he?" asked the sport, with a glance at the marshal.

"I always like to see how a man looks when he has a moderate mad on before I decide to trust him fully. Between Hannah's piety and Dick's profanity I think the family is fairly balanced, and we are safe in going ahead."

"You bet you're safe, sport. I'm going along myself."

Out from behind a rock which jutted up

near the trail stepped Laurel Blossom, handsomer than ever.

"Marc wanted to come, too; but he's a little quick on the trigger, and I'm not sure he's the man for the occasion. We want nothing but cool heads in this outfit."

Soft Hand Cy looked not altogether pleased with the addition to his party, but said nothing.

If the feminine sport had made up her mind he knew he couldn't change it, and the best plan was to keep her in as good a humor as possible.

Genteel Jim was just the other way.

"Don't worry yourself about me. My life is insured in the Accidental, and I make it a rule never to hurt the other fellow. It's cold bluff that does it all. As a general thing, there is no harm done. Marc would have been safe as a church."

"Of course. But if Marc should have been killed? Who, then, would have comforted the widow? And, by the way, don't repeat that bit of incidental information. I only give it to my very best friends, and it might hurt my standing in the camp if it knew."

"Consider it sacred, and take my very best thanks for the warning. I have lost my head already on less occasion."

"I am sure you will take it; can Marc be?"

"Every time."

After that the marshal came into the conversation and they talked business.

Laurel Blossom seemed to be a mine of information herself, and she spread out her statements with a clearness and a vigor which soon put the marshal and his sporting friend in full possession of her store of facts.

Of course, she had picked up the current gossip of the town, but behind that seemed to be an intimate acquaintance with the claims which Bangs was interested in, and of Leo Crandall's business that must have been gained by personal observation, if it was reliable.

Dick, the guide, said nothing, except a grunt when appealed to, and they hardly noticed how fast they were getting over the ground.

When they turned up a gorge leading toward the Vallance' claim they were not half a mile away from what they had intended should be their journey's end, and when they had fairly got within the defile they were suddenly hailed from an ambuscade:

"Halt, thar', pard! Et all goes in ther day's work, an' I reckon I'll hev' ter take yer in. When a marshal sets out after Captain Tulip he 'most jinerally finds him afore he's r'allly wanted."

The challenge did not find them altogether unprepared.

Laurel Blossom and the sport were walking side by side, and both seemed altogether interested in the affairs of the Crescent, when, at precisely the same moment, they gave a quick glance ahead and then darted to the side of the trail. Simultaneously they had caught a glimpse of the tip of the barrel of a Winchester.

At almost the same moment a man darted away from where they crouched, exclaiming:

"Git lively! Et's Tulip, an' he means murder!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BLIND MAN'S BARGAIN.

Though Bangs had retired to the office for the night, he did not at all intend to remain there longer than he had to. It was pretty certain he would have no trouble in finding an opening at Johnson's hotel, even if some one had to be bundled out in order to make it.

Now that things had been straightened up with Crandall it was as well to get closer to the town, and thus expedite business, and have a better view of how things were running.

Bangs and Leo Crandall got in in time for a late breakfast, and did it without coming across the marshal or his friend, though it did not take them long to learn that the two were in the house, as also Vallance.

Later on Bangs went to his room, and as

it adjoined the one occupied by Soft Hand Cy, and its walls were about as thin as pasteboard, he had no trouble in overhearing the conversation which has already been detailed.

Of course he got a good idea of what movements were to be made, and chuckled to himself as he noted how exactly they agreed with the course he had mapped out in his mind as the one likely to be pursued.

He left the house very shortly after the sport and his friend, but he went so quietly his movements attracted no attention, and he slipped out of town without being spoken to. It was some hours later when he reappeared, knocking at the door behind which Zebulon Vallance was sitting.

"Come in!" said the blind man, turning his ear toward the door, and waiting to hear the footstep which he thought he would be able to recognize.

There was disappointment visible in his face, though he knew the sound of that footfall well enough, seldom though he had heard it. Deprived of sight, his other senses had become doubly acute.

"You must not think this is an intrusion," began Bangs, without any other preliminary.

"I am here to do you good if I can. After that, perhaps we can make a turn that will do me good in another way, but I want you to understand I'm not trying to buy my way into your confidence. The two things happen to run together, that's all."

"I am afraid I am too poor to be able to buy or sell," replied Vallance, sadly.

"I am bereft of everything, and unable to help myself. I seem to have found friends, yet my experience of the world has shown me that it was and is selfish. What can I hope for from it?"

"Nonsense, old man. I suspect you are better off than you think for in the matter of friends. If Soft Hand Cy has taken up the case, and Genteel Jim is backing him, all I am afraid of is that there will be no room for me. Most likely there won't, unless they get on the wrong scent, or take a stubborn notion to fight it out. Tulip is not exactly the man to play hide and seek with when he holds a young lady as a prize. The sooner you get her out of his hands the better. And that is where money comes in at."

"Yes. If I had money not a day, not an hour, should be lost. It makes me wild to sit here in the darkness and think of my girl in the hands of that fiend. Oh, if I had wealth I would come to his terms if it took every dollar."

"My own idea, exactly, and feeling that way myself is the reason why I want to stand by you. If it was sheer business I suppose I would not care, for I'm something of a hard man myself, but a woman in the case makes a difference. I'll tell you how I stand. If the marshal can get on the trail well and good. Let him fight it out, and I'll save my money. If he can't, say the word, and the ten thousand Tulip asks for is at your service, and I'll stand back of you to see it is not thrown away."

The proposition brought Vallance to his feet.

He held out his hand.

"You are a friend, indeed. I know that you can if you will, and since you have spoken I do not doubt your word. Secure the release of Dora, and in some way I swear you shall be paid. The gratitude of a lifetime can surely in some way be coined into ten thousand dollars."

"Never mind that. We can come to terms in the line of gratitude, and leave the rest to take care of itself. If the young lady is half as willing to treat as you are it may turn out a good investment for both of us."

"The mine?"

"Yes, the mine. The chances are there is not a cent in it for any but selling purposes. I may as well own I have had my eyes on it, and know what the signs are. But it lies near the Crescent—and when that gets to booming there are plenty who will give ten thousand to try their luck, and if things pan out as we expect over our way that would be a very low figure."

"If you want to buy you are honest. I begin to trust," said the blind man, holding up his hand.

"Oh, I am only halfway honest. It's worth that and more—to sell. If it was to work I wouldn't look at it. I am giving you a straight pointer, so you won't throw it away. Some men would have jumped it long ago; but, pard, the fact is, it wasn't worth it. We just let on that the thing would be done, or was done, and then held back. When you are shuffling off an uncertain property you want a sure title to start with, or the other fellow may lay back to play you sharp."

"But do you mean it is actually worthless?"

"Not a bit of it. Only I wouldn't advance the funds to make a development. Let the other fellow do that and take his chances. He may strike it rich, and he may go broke. Who can tell? That's his lookout."

Vallance shook his head doubtfully.

He knew little about the Dandy Belle, but it seemed to him that Bangs must have made a pretty thorough investigation from the way he spoke, and perhaps was taking advantage of his necessity to lead him into a way that was not strictly honest.

Bangs saw the doubt and continued:

"You can't tell, and any mine is worth all you can make out of it. I would think myself a fool to blow good money into that shaft, but it's the fools that sometimes win. I knew just such a hole that was salted and sold three times, and the last fellow dug a hole clean through to China before he threw up and hanged himself. Then a kid came along and bought it from the administrator and started a side drift. He struck it rich the first week and sold for five ciphers and a healthy figure in front of them. But you and your daughter can't afford the luxury of experiment, and I won't."

"It may be as you say. And—I cannot hesitate. I can speak for Dora. Save her, and you shall name your own bargain, just so we can get away from this land—to which we should have never come."

"Rest easy. You will both go back none the worse for your trip. I dropped in to see how you felt, but I haven't been exactly lazing away the whole morning. It's the opinion of Doghole that it won't pay to fight Tulip if you can afford the other thing, and yet I have sent out a few scouts to see how the land lies. Which-ever way is the cheaper, that is the one I want to adopt. You just understand I am your solid friend, and trust to me. Dora will be back again soon as we can open up communication and get the returns."

"You make me hopeful, indeed. If those other men who have also professed to be my friends were only here you might arrange together. They seemed in earnest—but, oh, so slow!"

"That's it. Slow is no name for it. And they would soon as not spoil every chance for the sake of a little fun and glory. I don't think we could work together at all. You keep dark about our little arrangement until you see who it is that makes the rifle. Then tie to him. You'll find I'll be there. So long. I'll see you later, and give you the news."

Bangs managed to get possession of the hand of the blind man, and gave it a wringing shake. Then he went away, leaving the father perplexed, but somehow in a more hopeful frame of mind than he had yet been. When Bangs talked at a man he did his work thoroughly, if he could only get him to listen.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TWO MEN DOUBLED.

To go back to the missing Dora.

The unexpected attack threw the four men into confusion, and the leader went down with his horse. They all hesitated a moment between fight and flight, and that settled it.

Each of them found a man suddenly by his side, with pistol upraised, while there was a reserve force which could sweep them from the road if these four failed.

"What sorter game be this?" blustered the leader.

"Wolf don't eat wolf, an' I dunno' thet you got ther 'hull right ter hunt 'round this corral."

"When we git down ter ther pure quill ov bizzness we don't arg'y on ther right ov it. All thet kim's along jest goes in ther day's work, an' so, we'll take a hand hyar. What's b'in goin' on?"

"Nothin' that you kin make a strike at. Yer orter hit us later on, when we'd got ther boodle. Et's a blamed water haul fur yer now."

The fellow chuckled as he spoke. There was hardly a dollar in the outfit.

"So thar' war' a show fur rocks in ther perceshun? Good ernough. We kin take et up whar' you leave off, an' scoop ther pile. What's this yer got?"

He stooped and peered forward.

"A corpse, by mighty! Spin out ther 'hull story, er down yer goes, an' I ain't sure you'll go aryhow."

The voice of the speaker rang out in sudden sharpness, and one of his men seemed to think the time had come, for he muttered:

"Give ther word, boss."

"Corpse, nothin'!" answered the leader of the abducting force.

"Hed ter give her a dose ter keep her fool mouth shut, but she'll be all right fur d'livery when ther time kim's—straight goods, all wool, an' a yard wide. She's a daisy."

"It'll be mighty good fur you ef ye'r tellin' the truth. We'll take her along ter bring her too, an' you kin come fur fear thar's b'in a mistake about et. Ef thar' hez—good-by, John, an' Jimmy, an' ther rest."

"But, oh, say, pard! Don't crowd us too hard. It hadn't orter be your shake, but ef yer sez so we'll pull out. You go your way and we'll go ours. What ther b'lizes do yer want ter feed us fur when grub's skeercee an' ther flask are empty?"

"You'll go 'long, an' mebbe you won't want ary fodder. Line 'em up, boys, an' let 'em walk tell we git to ther hosses. An' a couple ov yer help me ter stiddy ther gal."

With the four prisoners under careful guard the march was begun, and shortly thereafter the rapid retreat was fairly under way.

The night air would before this have revived Dora had it not been for various applications of the drug under whose influence she had been abducted. It was not long before she recovered consciousness, though the balance of the journey appeared like a nightmare, and she was unable to fairly recover her wits, even when she found herself resting upon a couch and heard an encouraging murmur in her ear.

"Chirk up, leetle woman. It's mighty rough, but yew'll come out all right in the end. All yew want is tew have a leetle faith."

Dora turned her head languidly. She did not even recognize the voice, and closed her eyes a moment later. As she had no idea of where she was, or in what hands she had fallen, she was not particularly alarmed, and was too weak to be inquisitive.

Seeing this, her attendant glided away, and she was left to sleep the sleep of exhaustion, though there were eyes which uttered a sound it would have been heard.

Her abductors were not having quite so comfortable a time.

They were up before Captain Tulip, who was dressed as he had been when Genteel Jim and the others met him in the vicinity of the Flume, and he was as quaint as ever.

"D'unno' ary reason why I shouldn't hang you fellers to a sour apple tree—'ceptin' ther diffikilty ov findin' ther tree. Shootin's next best, an' ef I didn't think I could use you, er some ov you, I'd dispense with ther lot. You kin stan' aside."

He jabbed his fingers viciously at one of them, who seemed to think he had been told out, and that it was a piece of high good luck.

"I don't keer how he kicks, fur I've got him ary way I want him; but one ov you gerloots hez got ter be my man, an' I reckon I'd sooner take—you."

His finger, this time, pointed at the man who had been acting as the leading spirit all through.

"An' I reckon you can't git him," answered the fellow, bristling up with a show of courage.

"That's the way they allers begins, but to'ards ther latter end they sing a awful sight smaller. I'll own up, though, that I've knowed 'em ter die with a lie on their lips. Yer see, I kin use yer stiff most ez well ez ef you war' livin' inside ov et."

He played thoughtfully with the revolver he held in his hand, while he looked the man over. From what the ruffian had heard of the outlaw captain he would be as apt to shoot as to spare, with his desires rather for the former. It was an uncomfortable outlook. Finally he growled:

"Speak out an' say what yer wants. I ain't in no hurry ter go up ther flume, an' mebbe we kin dicker."

"Oh, thar' will be no dicker about it. You jest open up down ter bedrock an' tell me all about et."

"'Bout what?"

"'Bout this hyar gal. You didn't set up ther game. Who did? An' what war' they goin' ter do with her?"

"That's fur you ter find out, fur I'll sw'ar I don't know."

"See that rope, Tony? Thar's a noose to et that'll fit ye'r neck too snug."

He pointed to a cord which hung in plain sight. The man had seen it before, but had tried to play unconscious of its presence.

Tulip poised his revolver and gave a low whistle.

At the signal several men came forward.

"Tie him up han' an' foot, an' put his head in ther loop jest ter let him see how et feels. Don't want ter loose him fu'st off, though et may kim' ter that."

Tony might have put up a good fight under favorable circumstances, but under these he had no show whatever. He was caught up like a plaything, and the next thing he knew was hanging there, with the cord pressing around his throat, and the blood thumping in his brain, and things beginning to get very black around him. It appeared like an age until, at a signal, he was released.

"That's ther way et goes, Tony. I most allers give a man one chance, an' you've had yours. Et's ther last one, an' you kin make up ye'r mind. Open up, er off yer goes."

He held up his right hand, ready for the signal, and looked his prisoner straight in the eyes.

The contest, such as it was, lasted no longer.

"Hold on! I cave. I'll speak ther truth, ther 'hull truth, an' nothin' but ther truth. Thar' won't be half ez much ov it ez you think fur."

"All right. We'll let it go at that ef you keep right thar'. Who pays fur this job?"

"Dirty Ned."

"Him! He hasn't got ernuf coin ter pay fur one side ov yer."

"He hed it, boss, an' I ain't knowin' whar' he got it."

"I can understand that better. Who paid him?"

"I'll never tell. Reckon he kin."

"You kin tell me all about what you war' to be paid fur, then, an' I kin guess at ther rest. Make it short, but don't you leave nothin' out. I'll know, an' act accordin'."

At a motion from the captain his men fell back, and Tony began his story.

He said nothing about that part of it which related to Genteel Jim, since he did not consider that to be in the bargain.

It was an odd sort of a yarn, a little hard to credit, but he told it with an air of good faith.

The girl was to be taken to a retreat in the mountains and a message delivered to her father. Then he was to report for farther orders.

Captain Tulip looked thoughtful while he listened to the details, but did not doubt the word of the speaker, especially when he saw the letter which had been provided for the ruffian to send the bereaved father.

"Didn't think how nice he war' fittin' ther case," chuckled the road-agent. "I'll

'tend ter sendin' in that communereation myself. An', my boy Jack, he'll go long. You ever see him afore?"

A man stepped forward, and Tony could have sworn at first sight it was the same Jack who had stood aside at the opening of the conversation. Then he was in doubt what to think, for another Jack in his shirt sleeves was led forward, and the faces of the two were exact duplicates. The make-up was perfect.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the road-agent; "ef Tulip don't git to ther bottom ov ther plot he'll know ther reason why."

CHAPTER XXIX.

CAGED IN THE DANDY BELLE.

"Winchesters against sixes, and they with the advantage in position—it's no fair show."

Genteel Jim had taken to cover with the celerity of a red Indian, and he and his companion were screened from immediate observation, though if the shooting began it was likely a bullet or two would soon find them out.

"You down thar' may as well throw up ye'r han's. We're bound ter hev' yer!"

"Wonder if he thinks our teeth are all drawn and our claws so short we can't fight? That sort of a bluff don't need an answer."

Jim's whispered question was answered by a light touch on his shoulder, and he saw a warning finger uplifted.

"Hush! That's what they are aching for. There's Tulips and other Tulips; and this is one of the other ones."

"I begin to believe you, my girl. And if Cy don't get a move on they will down him sure, hands up or no hands up."

"They are looking for you. When they find you it will be time enough for that."

"And it won't be long before they hear from me, either. Hug the ground close, and wait till I break them all up. After that, get back as fast as you can. This isn't the place where I can do myself proud, but I'll give them one good lively hustle."

Not a rustle did the footfalls of the sport make as he glided away. Fortune it was for him that he had sought cover on the side of the gulch which he had instinctively chosen. It was the side on which the ambuscade was placed, and by chance there was a crevice which made it difficult to reach him from above without an exposure of person that the attacking party felt slow to make.

He looked upward.

"If they haven't located me yet I might get out among them before they knew I was coming, but I'm not so sure I want to do all that killing. Might drop a couple easy and bluff the rest, but it's a scandalous fact they've caught Cy in hock, and I've got to do something soon."

After this fashion ran his thoughts, but he was not sitting around while he reflected. He was climbing straight on upward. As the chances were that he would want to run away, no one would ever think of looking for him there, and his move was not a bad one.

One against an uncertain quantity—not less than six, and it might be a dozen—but Genteel Jim was something of a lion, and was not apt to consider a question of odds when he got to going, and the drop was not directly on him.

He heard some noises, but it was hard to tell their meaning. He had lost sight of Soft Hand Cy, who did not come within his range of vision again until he had nearly reached the top of the gorge.

Then as he looked downward, he saw that the marshal was in difficulties.

From the top of the opposite bank a noose had been flung, which encircled his arms, and had been drawn tight by a dexterous twitch.

It might hold and it might not, but they were running him up the face of the bank, while a warning voice from the side on which Jim was working shouted to Andy Dunlop:

"Stiddy, now, Andy, we got no use fur you, but ef yer moves we drill yer!"

The revelation came a little too late. It would not have been hard to drop one of

the men who were working the rope, and perhaps a couple of them, but Cy would have just as certainly dropped at the same time, and he was already high enough up in the air to make the fall dangerous.

"Tend to that later on!" thought the sport, and with another effort or two he gained the crown of the bank, and sprang to the level above.

His hands went up, and he pulled trigger almost as he came.

Yet there was no flurry about it. He found the men a little farther off than he would have liked, since they had Winchesters, while he was armed only with his revolvers. Still, he could place his bullets within an inch or two of where he wanted them, and if they did not kill, so much the better.

The first shot took every eye from what was going on within the gulch, and by the time they had located him, a second man was staggering away, while Jim was charging down on them with a yell, firing as he came.

The sudden appearance of the sport, and the way he was marking down the outlaws was demoralizing. He had commenced to take them just as they stood.

A shot or two in return were fired in an aimless sort of way, and then the man farthest off threw down his rifle and took to his heels.

Laurel Blossom had sprung up behind the sport and had likewise opened fire, and the result was a regular panic, though had the outlaws kept cool and been half-way decent shots, the odds would still have been in their favor.

"Down!" the girl shouted, as she saw that the victory at this point was won, and Jim ducked just in time.

The men on the other side of the gulch had caught sight of what was going on here, and one of them had dropped on one knee and was taking a steady aim. Had he pulled trigger a second sooner he would have potted the sport without a doubt.

He was coolly throwing up another cartridge to try it over again, when he received a kick in the back which sent him end over end, and a flurry followed which made Jim ache to be there.

Soft Hand Cy had been drawn up, and the rope was still around his wrists. It looked as though the two men who had hold of him ought to manage him, but they did nothing of the kind.

The marshal shot out the kick suddenly, then knocked the heels from under a second with a well-directed blow of the foot.

That left one more to manage, and at him he went, head down, with all the vigor of a battering ram.

Cy understood the use of his head as well as of his hands and heels.

He laid the three out in a circle around him, and had his hands loose before any of them could recover.

Then he whipped out his pistols and was ready for business. He might have made short work with them had he not received a sudden blow on the back of his head which brought him down to the ground.

Some one, he knew not who, had flung a revolver at him with a certain aim.

The blow did no great damage, but there was a ringing in his head, and an uncertainty in his thoughts and vision for a few seconds, and after that it made no difference. The outlaws, or whoever they might be, had followed their comrades, and run away.

"Victory!" shouted Laurel Blossom. "Now, let's get together and hurrah for the Dandy Belle!"

"The Dandy Belle?"

"Yes. That's the name poor Zack gave to the hole in the ground you folks are hunting. Don't know that you'll find anything worth all this blood and slaughter, but there is nothing like trying."

Blossom waved her hand toward the landscape and the retreating outlaws.

"Very little blood and no slaughter at all. Such nonsense makes me tired. Cy is motioning us to from the other side, and we'd better stroll along till we come to a better place to get down, or over. And—say!"

"You say."

"That was a blamed bad break Andy made. Had I better shoot him?"

"Let Andy go. Reckon he did the best he knew how, and angels could do no more. That's Cy's business, and maybe he did him a good turn after all."

Of course there was no pursuit, though if the marshal had had his regular deputies with him it would have been a different matter.

By himself he could not hope to accomplish anything, and the rest all said they were just too glad to have lost their outlaws. They weren't hunting for any more.

There was time enough to discuss the attack as they went along, and the advance on the Dandy Belle was only temporarily delayed. As they approached the mine they began to move carefully, for there was no certainty the retreat had not been made to that very spot.

But nothing was seen of the outlaws. They appeared to have melted away into thin air, and as for the Dandy Belle—the way was open right into the shaft, with everything handy for their descent.

Dunlop pointed out the land around the spot.

He knew what was what, and in a few words told it. He did not seem to be sure the Belle was worth fighting for, but he did know some claims in the neighborhood had been practically abandoned, and was inclined to believe it was just a chance if it was worth while to develop it. If the men who owned the Crescent had not wanted it he would have said it wasn't worth the timbers in the stope.

"All the same, as no one objects, we'll take a look at it," remarked Cy, looking at the hole in the ground.

Laurel Blossom had her own ideas.

"And as no one knows whether the dangers are to come from inside or out, I'll just stay here and watch. If Crandall don't turn up with a gang it will be because you find him inside. The wonder is that he left the rope there."

"Which I'll take the trouble to examine before I trust myself to it," remarked Genteel Jim.

The rope appeared to be all right, however. One after the other the men descended, and at the bottom of the shaft Dunlop lit the lantern he had brought with him.

They looked around curiously, and had even made some exploration, when they heard the distant voice of Laurel Blossom shouting:

"Warehawk! I think the gang are coming now."

Then the rope was drawn rapidly up, and the three men were caged in the shaft.

CHAPTER XXX.

SOUNDS FROM THE CRESCENT.

The three men in the shaft for some time stood ready to take the defensive. After what they had experienced they expected an attack or a siege, and they vastly preferred the former, especially if anything happened to Laurel Blossom.

This place seemed vacated, and no one but the young lady would know what had become of them. If the rope remained drawn up they might be doomed to starvation. Certainly, they had expected earlier warning if danger happened to be afoot.

But the outlaws did not come; and nothing more was heard of Laurel Blossom.

"Looks as though we might be in a trap," muttered the sport.

"Only hope the fair damsel didn't set it with her own sweet hands. If she did—the sex are mighty uncertain. She may go away and forget all about us."

"So she ought to if we were such blamed fools as to be caught. But I don't just catch on to the object."

Cy was puzzled himself. He had taken a liking to the feminine sport, and could not believe even yet that she had wilfully deserted them.

"A woman don't generally require an object. What she wants is an idea. That's good enough for her—if it happens to wreck a town. Suspect she wants to keep us from musing over the trail. Let's make the best of a bad job and give

glance through the confounded place. We may as well see how it looks."

Dunlop knew the run of the drift, and led the way.

They could not get out at present, and if there was to be an attack they could meet it about as well one place as another.

"Looks more like a place to find a pocket," remarked Jim, when they thought they had seen about all that was to be seen in a cursory examination.

"Hush!" whispered the marshal in a low tone, giving at the same time a warning dig with the elbow. Unmistakably they could hear the faint sound of voices.

"Reckon they're comin'," said Andy Dunlop.

"Better git back to ther front an' take 'em ez they drop."

"You're off there. They're not coming that way. Listen."

The sound was from further on in the depths of the mine.

At least, it seemed so; and yet they had thought there were no other recesses to explore. There was something they had not noticed. Guided by the sounds which still continued they came right to the spot.

There was a crevice in the horsing, that extended downward, though it seemed to have been partially filled with loose, broken rock. Had their attention not been guided by the sounds they might have overlooked it altogether.

The crack was a regular speaking tube, and conveyed sounds which might be ever so far away distinctly to their ears, now that they were in the best position to listen.

Cy and the sport bent down, but Andy Dunlop folded his arms and stood carelessly by, while they were trailing the sounds, and then said:

"Reckon I ain't no call ter dig inter ther serets ov ther Crescent—that's whar' ther sounds kim' frum. Ef et's all ther same I'll go to ther front an' keep a eye open."

At another time they might have objected, for the sport had none too great confidence in him; but now he gave an impatient word and gesture, and their guide melted away, leaving the lantern behind him.

"You failed—that is the long and short of it?"

These were the first words they heard, and the sound of the voice made Genteel Jim start. There was something so familiar about it, though he could not exactly place it.

"That's what they'd call et, but we hed ther marshal all right ernal, an' ef ther boys on t'other side hedn't let ther sport git away with ther luggage we'd 'a' held our end level. But while we war' tryin' ter help them over ther drift our man got loose an' raised merry Hades. When ther rest ov 'em kim' splittin' up out er the kenyon we fired an' fell back."

"And the worst of it was, you didn't hit anything. Serves me right for not bossing the job myself."

"But, boss, we got 'em ag'in. Won't say et's jest so easy ter hold 'em up to ther rack ez you want 'em; but they're whar' they can't git away."

"What?" The intelligence seemed a welcome surprise.

"We foller'd 'em to ther Dandy Belle, and when they went down pulled ther rope up. Jest ez good a place ter hev' 'em, an' ef yer starves 'em fur a day er so they'll be riddy ter go whar' yer wants 'em."

"You might have done worse, and that's a fact, if I can trust you to tell the truth. If no one finds them they will be out of the way for a time, at least, and that is the most wanted. There is no particular call to kill the meddling fools unless it is blood for blood. Any of our boys dead?"

"Nary. Jest barked 'em, so ter speak, an' they're all able fur ter travel."

"Then see that there is a watch kept on the shaft from a safe distance. If they are found, there is nothing to connect us with them; if they are not, we have them where we want them, and as long as we want them. It would make a

mighty good graveyard if we didn't find any better place."

"Ef it warn't so near home."

"What is there in that? We're not expected to keep track of what is going on in an abandoned shaft. If they dropped in there and couldn't get out—you're sure of that, are you?"

"Not ef they kin fly. Otherwise it's a safe thing ter gamble on."

"See that they stay there, then; or, in some way are kept off my trail to-night. After I interview the girl I will know best what to do. If she neither can nor will give me a pointer—if she fails to come up to the situation—it will be the worse for them all. How did she seem?"

"Jest ez I told ye, boss. Willin' fur most anything ter git back to her dad, er fur him ter git to her. She'll talk straight ez a string ef she keeps in ther same mind."

"If?"

"Yes. I ain't bankin' too heavy on findin' a woman two times in ther same noshun. Mebbe you'd 'a' better b'in on ther spot ye'rself."

"It would have been better, if it had seemed altogether safe."

"Er, ef ye'r hed let me on to ther game so I could 'a' pumped her dry while she war' in ther humor."

"That's enough," answered the voice, sternly.

"I am running the affair, and you are making big wages. You have failed so badly everywhere that I am almost afraid to trust you in this. If I find any part of what you have said to be a fairy story, you can make up your mind to something mighty unpleasant."

"Let her go at that; but say, boss, wouldn't et be a good idear ter let ther racketty ole win'lass at ther Belle tumble in, an' p'rhaps a few ton ov gravel 'long with it? Wouldn't be much danger ov ary gerloot droppin' in on 'em; and ef you should want 'em it wouldn't be much trouble ter dig 'em out. I'm allers fur ther safe side."

"If you start the ground the whole thing will go. And yet—let it slide!"

"Slode she be. An' then what?"

"Get back to the cave and keep a good watch out till I oome."

"Watch she am. So long. I'll take Jack. I kin trust him, an' may need him."

"A minute, yet. Don't forget that I am holding you responsible for the safety of the girl from the time you get back, and if anything goes wrong it will be the worse for you. It has got to be a desperate game, and you are dealing with a desperate man."

"I knows how it is meself, boss."

The answer was simple, but convincing. It seemed to strike the man to whom it was addressed as something ludicrous.

He laughed shortly.

"So you do, Tony. I don't know of a more desperate man than you among my acquaintances—and I know a many. Wait here a moment, till I get back to the men on the drift, and then slide out with Jack for the cave. I will attend to the little matter at the Dandy Belle."

The listeners could hear the noise of departing footsteps. After that, all was silent for a moment.

Then they heard a voice, though from whence it came was more than uncertain.

"Be easy. You are safe here; and I, Captain Tulip, will attend to the rest."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A YOUNG LADY OF NERVE.

The experiences through which Dora Vallance had passed had been almost too much for her, and had she not been a young woman of sound health and vigorous constitution the results might have been disastrous.

As the hours went by, however, and a long sleep restored something of her wasted nervous force, she became not only thoroughly conscious of her situation, but somewhat better fitted to face it.

For the present, she was in no condition to do anything but plan for the future, since any attempt to escape at once would be certain to fail for want of physical strength.

At first she looked only at the bare surroundings, and shivered at the prospect of captivity in a cave; but before long she was able to put aside the question of present discomfort, and think only of the possibilities of ending it.

She had very little idea of how long it had been since she had been stolen from the Silver Queen, or whether it was day or night in the world outside. The hours appeared numerous and very long when she looked back, and the guesses she hazarded were wide enough of the truth.

The only thing to guide her was her appetite. When breakfast was brought she found she had an almost healthy capacity for it; and then, though time dragged on, there was no craving for dinner.

As there seemed to be no desire to starve her, it appeared likely that at the proper time another meal would make its appearance.

So it did, and with it came a surprise.

In place of the hangdog-looking fellow who had skulked in before, there came a woman; and to her astonishment the woman was her companion of the stage, Hannah Dunlop.

She entered quietly and stared at Dora by the dim light until she had made sure who she was.

"Thanks for mussy, it wuz the trewth they told me. I hedn't no ch'ice when they said come, but I would 'a' made 'em a heap sight of trouble if I hed b'in dead sure they were lyin' tew me."

"But how did you come here?" asked Dora, not altogether devoid of suspicion, for the appearance there of her late fellow traveler was truly remarkable.

"They called at the cabin, an' when they give a hint ov why they wanted me, bein' ez thar' wuz no way out, I put on my' bunnit an' went along. I'm here to make yew comfortable; an' mebbe git yew out ov the scrape. Who knows?"

Dora did not, that was certain. She was not even sure she could trust the gaunt and faded woman, who had temper and religion distributed over her in spots, and who might even be a confederate of the outlaws, for all she could make out.

At the same time, the presence of one of her sex was a comfort, and she accepted it with pleasure, for the present not having much to say.

There was an improvement in the cookery at dinner, and supper came in the course of events. The last half of the day did not seem near as long.

Of course, she was only guessing at the time, but it seemed to her it was some hours after sundown when she had a visitor.

She looked up at him, and through a mask saw the eyes of Captain Tulip gleaming down on her.

"Comfortable, are you?" was the careless question as he looked over the prisoner.

"Not exactly first-class apartments, but the best we have to offer, and for temporary circumstances will do well enough. If you expected to make anything of a stay it would be different, of course."

"Comfortable!"

She waved her hand at the surroundings, and looked at the intruder with an eye of scorn.

"Might be worse," he answered, with something of a chuckle.

"The orders were that you should have the best on hand, and if they were not obeyed I will find out the reason why. Perhaps, when your visit has ended, you will find it has not been altogether unprofitable. Of course, you understand certain risks have not been undertaken without an object. Are you ready to talk business, or do you want to postpone it—and our final arrangements—to another time? That would mean a longer residence here."

"Anything but that. Let me know what is the meaning of this outrage—unfold the worst at once."

"There is no worst about it. It all comes in the line of business. Half a loaf is better than no bread, and we are willing to make a fair dividend any time you want to make the arrangement. Ten thousand is the amount we have named

with your father, but of course that was only a flyer, and when we come to talk things over we can get at the exact amount a great deal better."

Dora looked at the speaker more sharply than ever.

His appearance was all right, and the tone of his voice seemed familiar, but his manner was not altogether that of the road-agent as she remembered him.

Perhaps he was excited when up at the gorge where he had helped to rescue her, while here he had a chance to weigh his words and speak in cold blood. To save her life she could not decide whether this was the same man.

One thing was sure.

If he held her there until her father furnished a ransom of five thousand, even, there would be a good many deaths from old age before she saw civilization again.

"Surely, you should know better than that," she answered, at length.

"You might as well ask us to hand you over the moon. We come here as poor as poverty, to look for the body of my brother, and from what I have heard we will go away still poorer. You have seized the wrong person to obtain any such ransom."

"Perhaps, and perhaps not. If we were satisfied of your thorough honesty we might be able to bargain; and we would be willing to run the risks of our time being thrown away. Your liberty ought to be worth more to you than ten thousand dollars."

"And decency, and honesty, and all that ought to be worth more to you than the question of my liberty. I refuse to treat at all until I am restored to my father. It would be simply throwing away time in wild nonsense to talk of such a trade. You have made a mistake, and the sooner you undo your work the better it will be for you."

"Will you swear you believe all that?"

"Why should I? And yet, if it brought me any nearer to freedom I would not hesitate to attest to the truth as I have told it. The little my brother left behind is all that we have now to call our own; and even could it be found it would scarce amount to enough to take us back to the place from which we came. We have not been here long, but our eyes are open to what we may expect."

"I swear, I think you believe it; and so, you ought to be doubly grateful to us for all our trouble. Your eyes may as well be opened now as later on to the fact that if those same assets can be realized you will not be quite so great a pauper as you believe."

"There is a hole in the ground; and the man who dug it is in his grave."

"Yes, but before that gentleman went to his tomb he had the pleasure of taking out a neat little fortune. As to its whereabouts there seems to be a doubt, but it will be our business to remove that doubt—and I suspect before we get through you will be free to admit that we are entitled to our reward."

He spoke in a jesting tone, but behind it there was a spice of earnestness which could not be mistaken. Dora started.

"That doubt we could solve for ourselves when we came to it. You may be sure no payment will you ever get for interfering in what is our own affair. If there is any manhood or chivalry in the country you may get something more appropriate—justice."

The courage of the prisoner had not risen, but it was asserting itself. Whatever might be the result she was not yet ready to bargain or give hope that she would ever be willing to do it.

The man kept his temper well, and did not seem inclined to throw away a chance.

"I begin to believe you are truly ignorant of what has been done, and that little fortune lying hidden for your taking. But I do not believe that no hint was given. You have been too blind to see, that was all. If you are wise you will deal it out straight, and tell us exactly what your brother told you. Where is his letter? I can see through the solidest kind of a millstone; and I'll teach you

how to do the same thing. What did he say about the nuggets he found? A hint would be enough, perhaps. And of one thing let me solemnly assure you. Until those nuggets are found, and shared, out of this you do not go alive, unless on a better guarantee for the future than I think you are prepared or willing to give."

He spoke with impressiveness, and it struck Dora that he was something more than a mere bandit. If so, she doubted if her chances for safety looked any the brighter for the discovery.

This was the thought which caused her slightly to alter her tone.

"It may all be as you say, but were I able to give you the last word of writing, neither in that nor in any other would you find anything which hinted at a fortune found. It all spoke of failure. I can repeat word for word every line of his messages, and will do it, if it only be to prove how wildly you have been mistaken. You have simply made the mistake of your life."

And when she made good her promise, though the man listened intently, it did not seem there was any hint in what he heard which could justify the opinion he had formed.

"It is a pity you don't know more. You may have to pay for your ignorance, yet. If you had known, it might have paid you. Better try and refresh your memory by the time I come again. I may have a bargain to offer you, and you will be wise if you make up your mind to say yes."

"Do you mean that I am to remain here, treated like this?"

"That is about the amount of it."

"Then I warn you to beware. The law has given you a little rope, but when you put one end of it into the hands of a person with a grievance, vengeance may make it draw where a troop of soldiers would not be able to stir it an atom."

She shook her hand threateningly, and then looked upward as though registering a vow with Heaven. It was only the threat of a woman, but it was one to which it might have been well for Captain Tulip to give heed.

Instead, he smiled, shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TULIP TEARS THE TRAP.

He went out with the air of one who had been fighting a battle and was not altogether dissatisfied with the result.

The man called Tony met him, and his face was anxious.

"How long are this hyar thing goin' ter last?" was his query, as he came slipping up to the side of the captain.

"Don't mind it when ther gang are 'round, but we're mighty short-handed ter stan' a siege, an' thar's no tellin' how soon some blunderin' fools'll git on to ther lay-out an' try ter call us down."

"Let them call. You could hold the place against a small-sized army. And you are not exactly alone here, anyhow."

"Next thing to it."

"Where are the rest of the boys? Call them up, and I'll see if I can pick out a couple who are not afraid to earn big money. You seem to have lost your nerve."

The sneer in the voice of the captain did not seem to affect Tony a bit.

"Call 'em up, thunder! They're up a-ready, an' keepin' a good lookout fur breakers. We count on earnin' our stamps every time, ter say nothin' ov our own precious necks. They don't ketch us a snoozin' when they play 'round this little dugout."

"And if the men from Doghole find you out what do you expect to do?"

"Slide out on ther fu'st boat. Don't reckon we'd coop ourselves hyar an' put up a racket whar' they got ter take us er quit ther country fur ther laughin' at 'em. That's straight goods, jest ez I b'in thinkin' it all out. I want ter play yer squar' an' let yer know what ter 'pend on. We'll stay by you till ther last horn blows; but when you ain't hyar—sabbe?"

"I understand, and you might do worse. Nothing like speaking out in meeting."

When I'm out of the ring the boys look for themselves; when I am in they stay by the boss."

The captain was thoughtful and spoke without much attention to his words, though, to tell the truth, the decision of Tony was not a surprise. For this sort of work the men needed a leader all the time who had a little more interest than Tony had in this matter. The danger in this game was worse than simple tax-gathering along the mail route, and the hampering of their movements by the presence of the prisoner might render their capture certain if they attempted too much.

"Glad you do, cap. I knowed when you got ye'r second wind you'd think better on us. What we want ter know are, ef we hev' ter scoot, what shell we do with ther gal? Reckon you don't want ter harm her; an' ef we dragged her over ther back trail she'd be purty much all tore apart."

"No, no! I'm not that bad. If the worst comes to the worst, and you have to abandon this place, leave her here. It's a bluff game we are playing, but because the hand won't win is no reason we should burn the deck."

"Good enough. That's what I wanted ter know. We'll treat her right, an' you white. Reckon you hev'n't made ary terms yit ter show how things are goin' ter run."

"Everything is moving as it should," responded the captain, shortly.

"You will hear from me to-morrow, and if all goes right the job will be over."

Tony looked as though he might be relieved at the intelligence, but said nothing. The captain was already taking his departure, and a gesture showed he did not desire company.

The two had been standing on the level rock in front of the room occupied by the prisoner.

In front of them was the opening which bordered on the canyon, probably a dozen feet wide, while thirty feet above hung the dark roof of the cave.

One one side was a rugged, ragged ascent, along which trailed a rope, and it was by this route the outlaws expected to make their retreat in case their hiding place in the canyon was found by any party strong enough to attempt an attack or a siege.

At the other side there was a slanting crevice, reaching downward in a narrow ledge.

It was the path by which the retreat was usually reached, and so adapted was it to defense that one man could have held it against a dozen, if he had a little bit of luck to help him, and his ammunition did not fail.

Down this crevice the visitor made his way, with the air of one who was well acquainted with the path. He reached a little platform below, and here the captain found a horse, saddled, bridled, and waiting for him.

He mounted without delay, though the path below was even yet steep and difficult. His progress was slow, but after a time he reached the true bed of the canyon, where traveling in the dark was not quite so dangerous.

There was what had once been the channel of a stream, which was here and there choked with boulders, while the sycamore and evergreen oaks which bordered it helped to shut out the little light which could have struggled down from above.

With the rein hanging loose the horse was allowed to pick its way along as best it could, the captain peering sharply from side to side, though conscious that eyesight could do him but little good.

The hoofs of the animal now and then striking a rock made a sound which rose with startling clearness on the silent air of the night, and more than once the rider muttered a half-audible oath as he thought how far the noise might carry.

Suddenly a little tremor ran through the body of the animal. It made a slight swerve with its head turned, and ears bent forward. Something had attracted its attention.

It might be an outlying sentinel who had changed his position since the captain had entered the canyon, but he was taking no chances.

Without ever allowing the horse to check its speed, Tulip slid silently to the ground, and then walked on, one hand resting on reins and saddle.

What it was that should be feared he knew not, but when on the warpath in these regions there was nothing like caution.

Whatever it was would soon be made manifest or else passed altogether. The silence continued, and from the movement made by his mouth the captain had learned the exact spot at which to look for danger. If it was an ambuscade it could only be a minute or two before the trap would be sprung.

Then, without a particle of warning, the horse stumbled over something in his path, and several dark forms sprang at its head. A voice shouted, "Hands up, there! No resistance, or take what you get!"

At the same time a light flared up as a burning match was applied to a little heap of dampened powder.

The ambuscaders had the horse safe enough, though it snorted, struggled back, and attempted in vain to break away.

But Captain Tulip was something else altogether. He had vanished.

Alert and ready to move on the first touch of danger, he had wasted no time. As the horse blundered against the lariat stretched across the path, he darted backward and then to one side. With wonderful activity, and yet more wonderful silence, he scrambled out of the bed of the dry stream, and when the light flared up he was already beyond its revealing reach.

It was well for him he had dropped out of the saddle when he did, for otherwise his capture would have been almost certain.

Once against the rope, and with the moment of hesitation and indecision which must have followed, he would have been lost. Strong hands were reaching for him long before the struggling horse was mastered, and he would have been pulled down before he could have struck a blow.

He heard several half-suppressed cries of astonishment and disgust as he crawled away, and before they had well mastered the facts of the situation, he had flanked the little attacking party, and was on a vantage ground from which he could have sent in a half a dozen shots with deadly precision before a single answering one would have been apt to come his way.

For a moment he lingered, his hand on a revolver in a hesitating way. By the flaring light he could make out that the men were masked, but to him they were strangers.

Who could they be, and why had they attacked him?

The questions were ones he could not answer, surely, though he had a glimmering suspicion.

"Best leave them alone," he thought, as he finally turned silently away, with his revolver still at a ready.

"Unless I cleaned up the whole outfit shooting would do no good. By the Heavens, they seem hot on the trail! Can they catch Tony asleep?"

"They must have taken Jack off guard to get here without an alarm. It looks as though there might be a hitch in my little speculation. When I come again it had better be with an army."

He would have liked to warn the men at the cave, but to do it would have drawn attention to himself. If they were not caught napping they could defend themselves against a party like this, while, if they were, they deserved all they got. In either event, after the fair warning Tony had given, the prisoner would be apt to be left to shift for herself.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ROPED AND FLUNG.

The captain was not by any means out of danger when he began his retreat, for his progress was slow, and were he once located he might be overhauled or headed off by those in the bed of the canyon.

With care he made his way along by feeling rather than by sight, and now and then halting to listen and take his bearings.

The distance he had to go in the dark-

ness was not half a mile, but it seemed as though he had been an hour on the way, when he came near to the place where the defile debouched upon the open ground of the foot hills.

Every sense was on the alert when he suddenly came upon a man who was lurking in the shadows, and who started up as though he had received no notice of his coming.

There was no time for him to make good his escape, and as to resistance he was but a child in the strong hands which seized him. The fingers of Tulip closed on his throat with a vise-like clutch, and then a strong wrench flung him backward. He had a prisoner helpless at his mercy.

Under other circumstances it would have been a knife-thrust to silence, but just now the captain was after information. He was willing to come to terms, even, if he could obtain aid in solving the mystery of the unexpected attack.

"Not a whimper!" he hissed savagely into his captive's ear.

"At the first yell you get this knife right between the ribs. I'm willing to run the chances after that warning, and I mean exactly what I say. If you cheep small and after the right fashion, perhaps it won't be such a bad thing for you, after all."

He loosened his hold when he had spoken, judging from the actions of his captive that the words had gone home, but he still had a tight enough grip to control his movements and thwart any sudden attack.

The fellow had no intention of resisting. He might have done that in the first moment of surprise, but now, seeing his life was in no immediate danger, he was only anxious not to put it in peril. He spluttered a little, after the very softest fashion, and in a mild whisper said a few words which put quite a different face on matters.

The captain released his neck altogether, and though on the watch for anything which might happen, was not expecting farther trouble.

"It's you, is it, Jack? Pretty time to turn up. If they hadn't caught me on the fly I'd be giving you 'Hail Columbia'; but I suppose I'll have to let it pass. What's the game?"

"Blamed ef I know! They're rustlers, though, and don't you furgit it. Hed me roped afore I knew what they war', er whar' they kin' from. They meant business from the word go, an' said I war' w'uth a thousand alive er they would be after takin' me dead. That I wasn't fit ter straddle a decent hoss, an' they wished they hed bring a burro. Then they stuck me down among ther bowlders while they went on with the'r cattle drivin', an'-well, boss, it takes a masterhand at the work ter tie me ter stay."

"You got away from them, I see."

"Yes; but I wouldn't 'a' made it ef you hadn't b'in comin' down ther Kenyon. They hadn't eyes er ears fur me jest then, an' so, when I slipp'd ther ropes off'n my hands an' they war' layin' low fur bigger game, I spread my wings an' flew. Reckon I orter hev' give a whoop ez I went, ter put you on ye'r guard, but, honest Injun, it wasn't healthy ter try it."

"And as well you didn't. If you could have fallen back in the other direction and given them a warning at the den it would have been water on our wheels, but I suppose that was out of the question. What were you going to do?"

"Slink 'round an' see what sorter game war' up, anyhow. But it's jest ez yer say, boss."

"Keep right on at it, and if you can get to Tony give him a hint. Tell him to hold them off as long as he can safely, and if things run right there will be another thousand to divide among the boys. I'll be back before night falls again. He'll tell you what to do next. So long. They got my cayuse—good luck they never saw it before—and I've got a longer tramp before me than I'm yearning for. Wish the infernal thing was over."

The captain strode away, leaving Jack peering after him in a puzzled way.

"Blamed ef I know what I orter done.

He shordly ain't dropped to ary thing, er he'd b'in makin' it lively when he had ther chance. An' yet, somehow thar' war' a ring in his v'ice thet kinder seemed ter say he war' sorter up to what war' goin' on. Mebbe he ain't time ter fool away jest now, but it strikes me harder thet he's got some sorter a scheme afloat."

If Jack had his suspicions, so had the captain.

"What was the matter with him? It looks as though there was something more than one can see. Jack never talked that way when he was on the straight string. I ought to have dropped him for good luck, but perhaps I can use them a weenty, bit longer.

"They can't have tried to sell me out. No! He would have tried a shot for good luck when my back was turned. He's not exactly a cur, but he has a way of snapping from behind, and he has pluck enough for that, every time. Curses on the game! I've shuffled the cards once too often, and now I'll have to make a clean sweep of what's in sight and then jump the game."

The captain frowned as he thought, and his stride grew lengthier and firmer.

"If that is the way it is going to work Tony had better look to his brains—but, no. If there is a deal he's been sold along with the rest. I can trust him a while yet—and I'm not sure but what I would sooner that it was the other way. It would be easier to let him have it in the neck and be done with him. He's the only one who knows too much. Perhaps he may have to go.

"One thing is sure. If our doubles are taking a hand in the game here they know the ropes and are bound to block one side of my game. I'll head them off, though, and score double on the other."

He chuckled in spite of his worry. The cards he seemed to be holding were good enough till they were beaten, but after that he had another set up his sleeve.

There was a good five miles' walk before him still, and it was more than likely he would be pursued. He swung along rapidly, and yet, in spite of his thoughts, his ears were open to catch the slightest sound, and after a time he heard something which caused him to look somewhat anxiously around.

There was a clatter of hoofs, which suddenly arose on the night air.

It lasted only for a few seconds—hardly a minute—as though the riders had unexpectedly struck a stony piece of ground in spite of their care, and had gone on some little distance before they noticed the fact, and could either pull up or cross it.

"They are bound to be going by guess," was the thought of the captain, as he hesitated.

"They couldn't see me at a hundred yards, and no man could follow the trail by sight. Better strike straight ahead till I can do better. If I am not mistaken there will be a better chance to stand them off farther on, and they may overrun the track altogether."

Stepping lightly, his ears open to catch every sound, it was not long before he grinned over what seemed to have been the wisdom of his course. He heard the soft thud of hoofs, and they were passing him to the right. The party, whatever it was, had taken a beeline for Doghole, and, as he had hoped, were wasting no time in exploring to the side of their route, though the front was so spread out that it covered a wide scope of ground.

The man on the left of the line passed within sight of the spot where the captain was shrinking down. By daylight the latter could scarcely have escaped being seen. He even heard a low-growled compliment.

"Dog-gun him, he's played it sharp. It's dollars ter dimes he hed another cayuse waitin' fur him, an' is safe in Doghole by this time. He's a durn lively flea, an' don't you furgit it!"

"Dry up, an' next time shoot ter kill an' be done with it."

"But ther boss—"

"Boss be hanged! He's too blamed anxious ter git things all hi's way, an' he'll fool around tell we all stritch hemp tergether. Shoot, say I."

The conversation was not as much a

puzzle as it would have been before the captain had thought things over, and yet, there were some things about it he did not understand.

No matter.

He knew what he might expect if he fell again into the hands of these men, and grimly thought the advice of the last speaker was one he himself would be apt to profit by.

If no quarter was to be given it would be well to fire the first shots if ever the battle was again opened.

The last sounds of the riders were lost in the darkness when the lurker raised up again to continue his journey.

Then, suddenly, there was the hurtling swish of a flung riata, and around his neck looped a deadly noose, which tightened as it touched, and without time to know that he had been fairly roped, he was flung violently to the ground.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE CAVE-IN AT THE DANDY BELLE.

Genteel Jim and his companion looked at each other by the light of the lantern.

"What sort of a game is this, and how long has it been going on?" asked Cy, with a puzzled face.

"It strikes me that as he has us just where he wants us he can afford to talk sweet till he has skinned off all the sugar, and meantime we can be sucking our paws like bears in the winter. If Laurel Blossom turns out to be in cahoots with him, Brother Tulip has played us for flats and no mistake."

"And Bangs has a hand of five aces in the game. If we get loose from this we'll call him down, anyhow. It's dead open and shut he's trying to steal."

"If we get out; but if he catches on to the amount of our knowledge I'm afraid if we go out at all it will be feet first. You heard the gentle hint about caving in the shaft. That means a planting for all time."

"Well? How are we going to stop it? If we stood at the end of the drift and yelled for all eternity it would make no difference; and down here pistols are no good."

"Have to trust to the outlaw, after all; and when we go broke on that there couldn't be a better place than this to hold the chips we've passed in. It won't hurt to look around, but till the smash comes you bet I'm keeping away from under the windlass."

"Here's with you, but it's hardly time yet to hear something drop. We may as well get the benefit of what little natural light there is on the subject and save oil."

It seemed as though they had exhausted the possibilities of that end of the shaft, and accordingly they made their way toward the opening. There was a bare chance that Laurel Blossom might have returned and could help them before the approach of the visitors they were looking for.

If anything of the kind had happened, however, Dick Dunlop would most likely have given the alarm. Or, so they thought until they came to where the light filtered feebly from above, and they had turn down the wick of their lantern without being left entirely in the dark. About that time they came to the conclusion their late guide was missing.

No chance had there been to pass him on the way. While they had been listening to the conversation through the speaking tube they had discovered, Dunlop had made his escape and abandoned them to their fate.

There was no sign of the rope, and as they looked up the straight sides of the shaft they could see how utterly impossible it was to climb it without the aid of the windlass.

Then they heard a noise, and crouched backward, just out of sight from above. While there was a chance of friends, it was more likely the arrivals would turn out the other thing, and it was as well to be prepared for them. Genteel Jim fingered his revolver with a yearning look, while the marshal crouched like a tiger ready for a spring.

If they expected to catch a glimpse of

the party above, or have opportunity for a shot, they were doomed to disappointment.

The steps stopped above, but there was no challenge, and no word of warning. Only there was the noise of hands and tools tearing at the old windlass, and then a rumbling crash.

Down into the shaft dropped wood and iron, and after it roared rock, clay and gravel. Daylight was suddenly shut off, and they were more thoroughly entombed alive than ever.

Up to this rescue needed only to be a matter of a few moments. Now hours must elapse before sunlight could again reach them, even at the behest of willing hands; and who should know to care that they were beyond the fallen debris?

"In hock, sure enough," murmured Jim, with a ghastly attempt at merriment.

"The last turn, and the bank's closed for the night. I'll never trust a woman again as long as I live."

"Take it easy, pard. I reckon you never did or you wouldn't be so willing to lay it all on to the sex. Bless your soul, it's not the first time I've been in a bad scrape, and you have got through with a squeak more than once. As we have nothing else to depend on I'll pin my faith to no better a hope than the road-agent; and if he gets me safely out of this I'll swear that unless he chuck's himself right in my way I'll never go hunting for him again. What's a thousand, more or less, to a poor sleuthhound when his wife's a widow?"

"Oh, I'm not cutting it like a cur, and don't you believe it. I'll own there's enough of the Injan about me to hate to die in the dark, but then, I hate to die anyhow, unless it couldn't be helped. Say; if this thing keeps up for a week or so you don't suppose we'll eat one another, do you? I've heard of such things."

"Dry up on that. You don't mean it. What I want to make out is whether Dunlop went up or down, and how he got there. If I knew he was shaking a free foot toward Doghole I'd expect him back again along toward night. Somehow I've got a suspicion that we are laid up here in lavender just to keep us out of the way while somebody else is running things. I've a disagreeable fashion of sticking my nose into what don't concern me; and when you were born you were tarred with the same stick."

"If there are any other likely grounds of hope spit them out while you are at it, and then we'll get down to business. There must be some way of getting out of this cursed hole, and we'll find it. I've never found it pay to wait on the rest of the world. It's a blamed sight less concerned about your welfare than you imagine."

"Glad to hear something like the old ring in your voice."

"Confound you, do you mean to say I weakened? I've been just eating my heart out to give you a chance to develop. I'll swear, from the sound of your voice, I thought you were going to faint. It must be the air. I guess I'm all here, and right, up to the present time. Come along."

It might have been that the closing of the shaft had some such effect as Jim suggested. At all events, there was nothing wrong with the courage of either of them now, and they began once more an inspection of the mine with an entirely different object from the one which had brought them there.

Again they discovered there was not much to find, and were inclined to grumble over the fact that it did not extend farther.

"No use, Cy," said Jim, as he threw himself down.

"It's jest a hole in the ground that had one end, and now it has none at all, unless you count ours in. Don't say a word more, but save your breath for the time when talk will have to do for something better. I'm mum as a clam."

It was not so much despair as weariness of the whole subject which sealed the mouth of the sport; and Soft Hand Cy made no effort to induce him to break his determination.

With the lantern turned down so that it

showed but the veriest glimmer, they huddled opposite each other in the drift and waited for they knew not what.

What seemed to be hours wore on. Perhaps the men slept. More likely they had a waking doze without much enjoyment about it, and which to most men would have been worse than a veritable nightmare.

"Say, Cy!"

It was with a hesitating whisper Genteel Jim broke the silence.

"Well?"

"If the sports in Doghole only knew."

"Yes."

"They could open a pot on a pair of jacks and it needn't cost them a cent beyond the wear and tear of feelings."

"Don't gush, old man. If my ears don't mistake me there's one of them calling you now."

The two were cool enough, and yet each would have had to own to giving a little start at that moment.

They heard a voice, sure enough, and it came from the Crescent, just as the voices had done before, only this time it was calling them.

Jim stumbled toward the crevice.

"All right. I'm listening and you're a shouting. What's wanted?"

"Want ter git yer out, in course. Take et all easy. Thar's plenty ov time."

"A fellow who's on the other side my think that; but it don't seem that way here. Just open the door right now and see us scot. If we stop this side of Doghole you can call me down on a seven at the head and I'll never make a kick."

"Open ye'rself. Ef yer wants a door reckon you'll hev' ter make one, an' I'm jest hyar ter tell yer whar'."

Genteel Jim gave a curse that was almost a groan.

"How in Hades do you expect us to make a door without tools? We've skinned this whole place over and haven't found as much as the small end of the handle of a pick. If you wait on us you'll miss that big money I was holding ready for you, sure."

"That's rough on me, but it's jest my blame fool luck. Hold on a bit, an' watch ther crack. Mebbe I kin help yer."

There was silence for a few minutes, and then a rustling, grinding, thrusting in the crevice.

The smaller end of a crowbar was pushed upward until it made its appearance, ready for the eager hand which grasped it.

With such a tool work could be done, and Genteel Jim fiercely attacked the spot, while a muffled sound of steady strokes began to be heard from below.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE FIGHT FOR A FINISH.

Dora Vailance saw the man depart with a feeling of thankfulness, though, at the same time, there was a sinking of her heart.

Relieved of a hateful presence, she was left in as much doubt as ever. What the end would be she could not even guess.

Mrs. Dunlop had remained discreetly in the background during the interview. In fact, the outlaw had not seen her at all.

Now she came forward.

"Thanks for mussy, the villain give us an idear. He means it all, an' yew kin set it down that yew air w'uth every dollar of what he wants, an' more. If yew git out of this yew'll owe him one or tew."

"I cannot say I understand what you mean."

"Yew don't He give the 'huil thing away when he talked about them nuggets. It's clear ez day."

"But there are no nuggets."

"Yes, they air. He sez so; an' he's not a man tew be fooled. Yewr brother found 'em all right enough, but what did he dew with them? Cap'n Tulip dun'no', an' yew'll hev' to find out."

"Hush!" exclaimed Dora, raising a warning hand.

She heard soft footsteps without.

Hannah drew back, looking from side to side in vain for a place to hide, but before she could attempt a retreat a man bounded into the little room.

Being an utter stranger, she cowered back as he advanced, with one hand at his lip, the other outstretched.

"Have no fear!" he said, in a low tone. "I have trailed the wretches here, and you have friends at work in the canyon. They may capture him, but he is a man of resources, and it is best to run no chances. Follow me. Once clear of this lair and I promise to take you back to your father in safety."

"Then you are—a friend?"

"Your solid friend. Make no delay. You and this good woman come at once."

"And who air yew?" asked Hannah, firmly, though without any pronounced air of suspicion.

"My name is Marcus Wharton, and I am a sport at large, very much after the style of Genteel Jim, though not quite so good a man. I'm on this trail to stay to the end, but the sooner it rounds up at Doghole the better it will be for all hands. Things can't be worse for you two, and I think I can make them better. There is not a minute to waste."

"Lead on, then. We will follow."

Dora spoke firmly and with courage. She followed Wharton without delay; and Hannah, shaking her head somewhat, and peering strangely at the young man, fell in by her side.

Outside, the little platform was deserted and silent, but Mark was not at a loss. He turned and pointed upward.

"There was no danger, but if there was it would have to be risked. Hold tight, and step surely. The rest is only a little hard work."

Fortunately, the canyon top lay only a few hundred feet above their heads, or it might have overtaken the nerves of the young woman, who was unused to mountain scrambling, and who had lost more of her strength during the last few days than her bearing indicated.

Yet the ascent was made in safety, and without giving more than a few moments for rest, Wharton hurried them on, his hand firmly grasping Dora by the arm.

On the night air the distant sound of voices came up to them, causing Dora to tremble with excitement. It seemed to her that danger was near, and her steps hastened involuntarily.

Their way led downward, after a little, and Wharton appeared to know it well. He found the smoothest route by instinct, and saved his charge more than one tumble. As they attended strictly to business, while Captain Tulip was, for reasons already seen, considerably delayed, they were already on their way toward Doghole when the outlaw left the canyon.

Mark halted and peered around. Then, at a motion of his, the women sank to the ground. They could hear the sounds of approaching footsteps, and even thought they could distinguish the dull sound of hoofs.

"Not a word," whispered the young man.

"Let me attend to the rest."

Hugging the ground closely, scarcely drawing a long breath lest the sound of it might be heard, they saw the dim outlines of an approaching man, and Wharton loosened his revolver to be ready for what might come.

Then followed the little train of incidents already described. At no great distance this other wanderer also crouched down, and the horseman swept by.

A warning touch kept the women where they lay, while Wharton crept on. When Captain Tulip arose to continue his journey he little thought that scarcely a dozen yards away a sure hand was already swinging a noose.

When the cast had been made, and he had fallen over backward, Wharton rushed forward.

The work with the rope had been skilfully done, and the captive lay gasping for breath, and all abroad.

Marcus Wharton pounced down upon him like a tiger, and turning him over, twisted his hands behind his back. Then, without a moment of delay, he tied the wrists with a fine rope which cut harshly into the flesh, and made such a thing as escape impossible.

Dora stood pale and trembling, while Hannah, with an arm under her, more than half supported her. It was a moment of thrilling interest, for they did not doubt but that their safety depended upon the victory of their guide.

Then a low cry of warning broke from the lips of Mrs. Dunlop.

She saw several shadows creeping out from where they had been lying concealed; and as yet Wharton had not seen them. They were coming silently as ghosts, but they were apt to be a great deal more deadly.

Wharton heard the warning, but it came a trifle late, even if he thoroughly understood it. He lingered a little over a knot; and before he had finished it the shadows were upon him.

The foremost threw himself directly upon the back of Marcus, and as the latter with a great effort staggered to his feet, clutching fiercely at his assailant, the other caught him around the legs, and between them they flung him heavily to the ground.

The movement, which seemed to be his destruction, was in reality the present salvation of the one against the two.

The fall broke the hold of the man upon his back. Marcus threw out his hands more fiercely than ever, and they closed upon the fellow for whom he was reaching. There was a wolfish snarl, a couple of Herculean tugs, and the three were rolling on the ground together.

After that, for a little, even had it been daylight, it would have been hard to follow the motions of the men. There was no opportunity to use a weapon so long as they were so closely locked together; and for strength and skill Wharton was the superior at rough and tumble fighting of either of the others; and almost of both.

Almost, but not quite.

"I've got him, Tony. Git loose an' put ye'r knife in his back afore he hooves a yell. Them cusses may git back, an' we got ter git ther boss loose afore they come."

The speaker had managed to throw both arms and legs around the sport, and though underneath, he had a grip which could not be shaken off.

Tony wasted no time in words.

He wrenches himself out of the struggling muddle, dashed his hand across his eyes, which were watering from a blow that had got in on one of them, and then cast himself on Wharton's back, seizing him by the neck with one hand, while with the other he flashed a knife from his belt.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ALL DOGHOUSE TO THE FRONT.

Another instant and the knife would have come down; but the interruption came.

The assailants had paid no attention to the women. Perhaps they did not see them, or maybe they believed that they were non-combatants. So far as Dora was concerned they were safe from interruption. She stood as one almost paralyzed, and watched the dimly seen contest without a word or movement.

Hannah had been supporting her with a woman's courage and tenderness, remembering all that had lately been endured. Instinctively it had seemed her duty was here.

But her eyes just then were far the keenest of the two, and she was following the fortunes of the war as well as she could.

She heard the advice of the under man in the fight, and saw Tony creep out and then launch himself upon Wharton's back. She also heard sounds in the distance, but her notice of them was blurred and uncertain.

All she knew for certain was that there was danger here and now, and with a wild cry she sprang forward, twisting the shawl from her neck and into a rude rope.

The cry reached the ears of Tony, and startled him. The knife did not fall, but he glanced over his shoulder, and as he glanced the shawl fell and caught him around the throat, while the heel of Han-

nah hit him in the small of the back like the kick of a mule, and she tugged away with a vigor there was no resisting.

Tony came sprawling off, and for a little had business enough of his own to attend to without thinking of his partner, who was beginning to find himself in difficulties.

In spite of his embrace one hand of Wharton managed to steal up to his throat and close around it with fingers of steel, which seemed eating into the bone as they tightened remorselessly.

He attempted to wrench loose, but the other hand came suddenly up to the back of his neck, and the jaws of the vise locked tighter. There was a gurgling, choking sound, and then Wharton twisted away, and sprang to his feet.

Mrs. Dunlop was holding her own bravely, but it was time aid was coming.

Tony was recovering his wits and his wind, and sprang at her, knife in hand.

The fist of Wharton shot out, his shoulder and the whole weight of his body following it.

The hit landed at the but of Tony's ear, and he went sprawling to the ground. The three men lay almost in a heap, and the victory was in sight. With his foot on the breast of Captain Tulip, Wharton whipped out his revolvers and peered downward at the motionless Tony, uncertain whether there might not be something of sham in the limp and nerveless way in which he lay.

A shrill cry from Hannah brought him to a sense of his other surroundings.

"Help! help!" she shouted.

"This way! For the laws a muss—help!"

The moon was higher now, and the plain lighter. She could see horsemen not far off, and without her cry they would have headed straight for the spot, since sharp eyes were keeping a keen lookout, and the fight had not been altogether without a sound.

"What in the name of high glory is going on here?" exclaimed the leading man as he came up, his outstretched hand covering Wharton with a revolver.

"Oh, it's Marc!" came from the figure which rode by his side.

"Go slow, Soft Hand. You bet it's all right and there has been fun amazing. What you got there?"

"I wouldn't swear to it, because things appear to be somewhat mixed, but for a guess I'd say it was Tulip and a couple of his gang. And over yonder is the missing young lady and a friend. Where I found them they can tell as well as I, and I don't care to blow my own horn."

"You've turned the trick, and that's a fact."

Genteel Jim sprang down and strode to the side of the young lady.

Even in that uncertain light he saw that she was quivering, with signs of collapse.

"Keep your courage up. We are all friends. Take a swallow of this to last till you can get something better. Get a brace on, and we'll have you back to the arms of your hopeful father in no time. Half of Doghole is coming just behind us, and you can have all the escort you want."

"Besides," he added, in a lower tone, "you won't want to take stock in what will be going on here shortly after Wharton tells his little piece. It looks as though it was a dead open and shut thing on Tulip, and I notice there are trees handy."

Wharton turned to Dora, and the attention of the rest was at the outset naturally in that direction. It was a desperate strait for the men whom Marcus had piled up together, and they knew there was no hope for them unless they took desperate chances.

One of them was beyond present hope of escape, for the cord at his wrists held him securely; but Tony had recovered his wits and knew it was time to get a rustle on, while Jack had already whispered a word in his ear.

Together they bounded from the ground, pistols in hand, and made a break for the hills.

The movement was an unfortunate one all around.

As Jim had said, about half of Doghol-

was coming, more or less, and right at this juncture they could be considered to have arrived.

At least, there was a squad of mounted men large enough to have given successful battle to the entire gang which trained under Captain Tulip. They had been hastily gathered up at Doghole, and the gallop had put wine into their life, so that they were ready for serious amusement.

As the two dashed away they were in plain view. If there was any doubt as to who they were they did not get the benefit of it, for there was an instantaneous discharge of firearms and Tony went sprawling forward, to paw up the ground for an instant with his hands and then lie faintly quivering.

So far as he was concerned he was off the trail forever. And when they turned him over and the mask had fallen, his face was the face of Harry Hall.

Jack gave a slight swerve, staggered for a few steps, and then ran on as gamely as before. Several more shots followed and pursuit began, but Jack knew his ground, and before the pursuers knew, he was swallowed up in the darkness.

There was one shot, though, fired from the crowd, the effect of which was not as quickly noted as that of those which brought down Tony and wounded his pard.

Genteel Jim had sprung toward the bound man, and was bending over him to make sure that in his case there should be no escape. When the other guns were trained on the fugitives one was trained directly on him!

"Fur me old pard!" chuckled a low voice, as the finger on the trigger tightened.

The distance was not great, and by daylight the shot should have been certain. The man appeared to think it had been, for he quietly wheeled, drew his horse out of the bush and started on the back track. In the excitement only two men singled out the marksman and knew what it was he had tried to do.

One of them was Soft Hand Cy, the marshal.

He had eyes for everything, and though too late to prevent the act, his hand came up with the swift motion of a snapshot shooter. He had heard the hiss of a bullet not far from his own head, and was not the man to stand a shot without sending back as good as he got, or better.

"Steady, pard! It's Grey Burke on the warpath for me. It wasn't my fault that I had to down his pard, and maybe some day I'll have a chance to make him learn reason. Till I've tried, I don't want to see him downed too hard. It was me the blamed fool was after, but his lead went where—well, where, perhaps, it has done more good."

Jim was just in time. At his first word the marshal dropped his hand and Grey Burke galloped on unhurt, while Soft Hand Cy bent over the man on the ground who had given a great start, and then had fallen to groaning.

Tulip had been keeping cool and quiet, biding his time, but with the stroke of that lead he knew his chances were done for, and that his living was only a matter of minutes or of a very few hours at the utmost.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"THERE WERE TWO OF US."

More than one of the crowd who had come out to the rescue had seen Captain Tulip, or the man who passed by that name. His attentions to the coaches on the trail to Doghole had been so persevering that there were plenty to recognize him, masked or unmasked.

The fact of his being a wounded captive created as much excitement even as the finding of Dora Vallance, on her way back to the town. The young lady was suffered to drop out of the thoughts of most of those present, and they crowded around the dying man, over whom bent the marshal from Weaver City.

Soft Hand Cy was wise in gunshot wounds, and he was looking this one over to see what hope there was for the man.

He shook his head gravely, for he saw there was none.

Grey Burke's shot-gun had been loaded with the usual charge, and was discharged at almost point blank range. More than one hole showed where the buckshot went, and any one of them would most likely have proved fatal. How he had missed raking in Genteel Jim was a mystery.

Of course the examination was of the most cursory kind, but, when Cy announced the result something like a reaction set in. The crowd would have hanged the man without hesitation, but now that he was "going over the range" there was an anxiety to, in some way, soften the road.

"Say," suggested one, "it's not more ner a mile ter Billy Baker's shack, an' it's a shame ter let ther poor devil lie here. What's the matter with totin' him thar?"

"Ef he ain't goin' ter pass in his chips right now. Ef he are we could save a heap ov hard work by waitin' a bit. Reckon ther ground hyar are jest ez easy diggin' ez it be about thar."

The man spoke plainly, but he hardly meant his words to be as brutal as they sounded. He was checked harshly, while they could hear once more Soft Hand Cy's dictum:

"If there's a chance to put him in somewhere it ought to be done. He may live another day, or he may die on the way there, but I wouldn't leave a dog out here in the night to die, and it don't look the square thing for the grave-diggers to be loafing around waiting for the corpse. It's not likely we can get eyes on more of the gang, and we may as well be taking the back track. You can hear how things went as we go along."

Up to this there had been no chance to hear how the rescue had been made, or what adventures the lately missing girl had met with. The suggestion hit the popular fancy, though there were a few questions asked and answered before the cavalcade took up its line of march.

It did not require many words to make it understood that Wharton had trailed the outlaws to their stronghold, out of which he had managed to slip the two women prisoners he had found there.

Afterward they had come upon Tulip and had been attacked by some of his men. Dora had recognized in the body of the dead outlaw the man who had for the most part been her particular jailer, and as to this wounded individual, whom they recognized as Tulip, he was certainly the man who had visited her and spoken in regard to a ransom.

Of all this Tulip appeared to hear nothing. He lay in a kind of stupor. There was little bleeding now from his hastily bandaged wounds, and at times he moaned feebly, but he did not seem to be aware when he was being moved, and it was doubtful if the movement gave him any particular pain.

After a few words to Wharton, the marshal had attached himself particularly to the wounded man, while Marcus, after a greeting from Laurel Blossom, had kept close to Cy.

When Baker's shanty was reached, the ladies went on toward the town, accompanied by the larger part of the procession, but the marshal and a few solid men remained with the road-agent. He would doubtless have something to say, sooner or later, and some of the party had a curiosity to know what it would be.

He did revive when he was once lying on Baker's bunk, and a few drops of whisky had been cautiously given him. His eyes opened, and he stared around.

"Where's Tony, old boy?"

"Dead," answered Cy.

It could be no great shock for the wounded man to hear it, and it was best for him to know the full truth at once. He would the sooner be ready for a confession, if he intended to make one.

"Poor fellow. I half suspected him once to-night, but he came to the rescue, and if luck had not been against us might have pulled us through. Where did that woman come from?"

"You mean Miss Vallance? You ought to know."

"No, no! The woman that prayed! I thought I threw her over the Devil's Flume, and that she was dead, dead! How did she get there?"

"Didn't you take her at the same time you took Miss Vallance?"

"I didn't take Miss Vallance. Tony did that, but I gave the orders. Oh, it was a very neat game I was playing on the old man, and it would have worked. Yes, it would have worked. Say, how did you get out?"

He seemed suddenly to have recognized the marshal, and stared at him with, for the first time, something like terror.

"Oh, Jim and I got around through the back door. That is all right. You just wanted to keep us out of the mix so we wouldn't get hurt, and we owe you one. If you can tell how it is to be done we'll pay it. But what is Crandall going to say about this? Have you been playing him dirt, or has he a hand in the pie?"

The question was a surprise to those who heard it, save to the wounded man.

"I reckon there's no hope for me?" he asked, with a little quaver in his voice.

"I'm sorry to say, as a judge of such matters, there is not."

"Then I'll tell the whole truth, and if you'll get the good book I'll swear to it. Crandall don't know anything about this game. He took me for what the rest did, and when he began to doubt, I just bluffed him. A mighty good man is Crandall, but squeamish, and—a blamed fool!"

He changed his mind so quickly that Cy, in spite of the solemnness of the situation, was compelled to smile.

"He wouldn't jump it, but he drifted under and struck the vein. He thought, maybe, we would find the pocket. It was worth playing for. What did Zach do with it? He didn't carry it away with him, I'll swear to that. And he didn't leave it in the mine. We've looked it all through. And it was a pretty pile, too. I thought he had told the girl, but she knows nothing about it, or was too sharp for me."

"So Crandall didn't know you were Captain Tulip at all?"

"Not even a little bit. He just knew Hiram Bangs, the man of money, who came down here to develop. Oh, he was a lamb! And I held him up not a month before, and touched his leather with my own hands! Ha, ha! What a game it was! And he thinking all the time poor Zach was the real, regular Tulip! If he hadn't thought that, he wouldn't have helped us hang him. What a fight the youngster gave us! But it didn't do us any good, after all. We didn't rake in his find. He was too sharp for us, and now, I reckon, when I go under, Crandall will be too soft to hang on to the Dandy Belle, the place where the money lies."

"Good deal the same sort of fellow that poor Andy Reever was? Eh?"

"Yes. Andy was another fool. He got kind of wound up in the girl, and wanted to give her a fair show. And then I found out he knew too much, and he had to go. Curses on the sport! I was afraid of him, and that was a fact. If he had only let drive at Andy's corpse I would have had him foul; but he wouldn't chip!"

The marshal was about the only man there who was not surprised by the revelations of the wounded outlaw.

That he was Tulip they had believed right along, but that he was Hiram Bangs, the man who had once before visited the city, and created such an excitement when he talked of the big investments he expected to make when he came again, they never for an instant suspected until they heard the intelligence from his own lips!

But, once having heard it, there could not be the shadow of a doubt on the subject in the future. They recognized the voice, broken and weak though it was, and under the disguise the face of Bangs once more shone out. Verily, he had played Doghole for flats, and up to the last moment had won.

It was impossible to believe the mind of the man was wandering, either. He answered too readily, and only seemed anxious to satisfy every one as to the truth before he died.

That the end would be long delayed the

marshal did not believe, and though there were still some things on which he would have liked to satisfy himself, humanity forbade to worry the man farther with questions.

Cy sat by the bedside nursing the wounded outlaw along as best he could with stimulants, seemingly keeping the life-works going in him, and waiting for a change of some kind.

Cy had come to Doghole to capture Captain Tulip; he seemed to have succeeded; and yet he was not as elated as he had supposed he would be. This man on the bunk was worth a thousand dollars now, but the thousand dollars were slipping away very fast.

The wounded man made a sudden movement and held out his hands.

Cy bent forward to catch a husky whisper just before the death rattle began:

"And don't you forget. After Zach was hung there were two of us."

They were the last words he uttered; a little later he ceased to breathe.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"WHEN THE MISTS HAVE CLEARED."

The return to Doghole by Dora and her friends was a regular torchlight procession, and if there had been a brass band in the country it would have been thrown in.

Laurel Blossom received the principal honor for the entertainment, for she it was who had gathered up the rescuing party and led it out, to be met by Genteel Jim and the marshal just after their escape from the Dandy Belle.

Dick Dunlop was not with them, for he had something else to attend to, and was watching a pile of nuggets which had been unearthed when the way was opened along the crevice between the drift in the Belle and the lower tunnel from the Crescent.

Knowing what he did of affairs, he was aware that this little fortune belonged to Dora Vallance, and did not intend to get his eyes off of it until it was safely in her keeping.

Genteel Jim came with the party, and no one seemed to remember that, on several occasions not very long ago, he had come as near to having his neck ornamented with a rope collar as men ever got in Doghole, and yet make a miss of it.

He stayed with the young lady, and he and Laurel Blossom had the pleasure of waking Zebulon Vallance to inform him that the missing daughter was missing no more.

The meeting was an affecting one, and right in the midst of it Dora swooned away. The only wonder was that it had not come sooner.

There was nothing serious about the faint, however, and it really seemed to clear the air. When she revived she was her old self again, and told the story of her adventures a little later, with only Jim, Laurel Blossom, and Vallance as listeners.

Very thrilling it all was, but there were some parts of it which puzzled the sport, and if Marc Wharton had not remained behind, at Billy Baker's cabin, he would have asked for information.

When he heard the confession of the dying man, as detailed to him the next day by Soft Hand Cy, he was more puzzled than ever. By that time, though, he was cool and quiet once more, and waited without remarks for the developments wh'ch he fancied would come sooner or later.

The marshal took a deep interest in the affairs of the Vallances, and, with such men as Cy and Genteel Jim looking out for them, it was not long before their business was arranged.

They took possession of the Dandy Belle without opposition, and the drift from the Crescent was closed up by the consent of Leo Orandall, who was singing very small.

The nuggets, or those of them which were not needed on the spot, went out by Express, not long after, and it is safe to say that cargo was not overhauled by Captain Tulip. With the death of Hiram Bangs the captain and his band disappeared from this section of the country altogether.

And yet—

Soft Hand Cy had taken his departure, and Wharton and Laurel Blossom were going.

Genteel Jim had become a rather close friend of the two, and the last evening of their stay in Doghole something that was said led up to the question:

"There's one little point the burg don't seem to have heard of, and I'm not going to tell. There was some kind of a transfer on the way out, after Miss Vallance was taken from the Silver Queen. Now, what I would like to know is, who got her, in the first place?"

"Captain Tulip's gang, of course," was the cool answer.

"Then, who had her in the next place?"

"Tulip's gang, of course."

"Oh, that thing won't wash."

"Yes, it will, when you consider the facts. Cy knew it, and he's a good fellow, and is not breaking his neck to make trouble. Didn't he tell you the last thing Bangs said to him?"

"Yes; and that was where the puzzle came in. Who was the other Tulip?"

"Honor bright, is it between pards?"

"Honor bright it is."

"Then here goes for the truth. I am the other Tulip. I was the counterfeit Tony who watched Dora up in the mountains—when I wasn't befooling Bangs—and I am—Zach Vallance, or his shadow."

Genteel Jim gave a shrill whistle of astonishment. This last was the one thing he had not expected to hear.

"Yes. This Bangs, who was the real article, got up a scheme by which he seemed to throw the proof wide open that I was the road-agent, and raised a gang of roughs here to down me. He counted on getting hold of my wealth, of the mine, and to send his own past out of the road altogether."

"They hung me offhand and went away; but Dick Dunlop was in the business and got me down."

"After that—confound it! I had the blame and I was going to have the game. If I showed my nose up at the Dandy Belle I was sure to be hung again; and so, in desperation, I organized another gang of the men from my mine and set up opposition. But I was always a master-hand at disguise, and I played a half dozen parts."

"The original had sent his gang into hiding and gone away temporarily to see how things were going to work, but when he came back I was laying for him. When I found what he was on to I checkmated him after my own fashion, and took possession of one of his old haunts."

"I figured as Tony, and had the real article cooped up fast enough. I counted on having Bangs caught when he visited his prisoner, and elevated, but missed it. Tony and Jack got away in time to make mischief, and in the guise of Marcus Wharton, under which I had been sailing in Doghole, I effected a rescue after Tulip had left, and started for town, expecting to meet Blossom on the way."

"The rest of the story you can guess at."

"But your father—Dora—do they know?"

A spasm of pain swept over the self-acknowledged bandit's face.

"Not yet. Some one has told them the truth as it is known here, but they will not believe I am dead. Some day, when things are brighter, and all of us have left Doghole behind forever, they may learn the real facts and see me when I have atoned. For the present, they are in the way of fortune, and must bear their sorrow as best they can. I might pose here as injured innocence, but I'm afraid to risk it."

So Zach Vallance and his wife went away, no one save Genteel Jim understanding the mystery which some could not help but dimly see was in the background. Though Dora had a vague notion there was something familiar in the face of the young man to whom she was so greatly indebted, she had been too long separated from him to pierce the disguise which had befooled Doghole, and Zebulon had no suspicions.

Genteel Jim was sport from the ground

up, and did not entirely give over the business of table and card, but, as a friend of father and daughter he soon became their business manager. As a result before long the Dandy Belle was a well-paying property, and was turned over to the management of a company, in which the Vallances, and likewise Genteel Jim, had a goodly number of shares.

Then, somehow, the three drifted away, and Doghole knew them no more.

The band which had trained under the fictitious Tulip vanished and Grey Burke disappeared the night of that last attempt on the life of the handsome sport.

The Dunlops, who had stuck by Zach through thick and thin, were properly rewarded. The rest of the camp was left about as it was found, and for the present this story has reach its end.

THE END.

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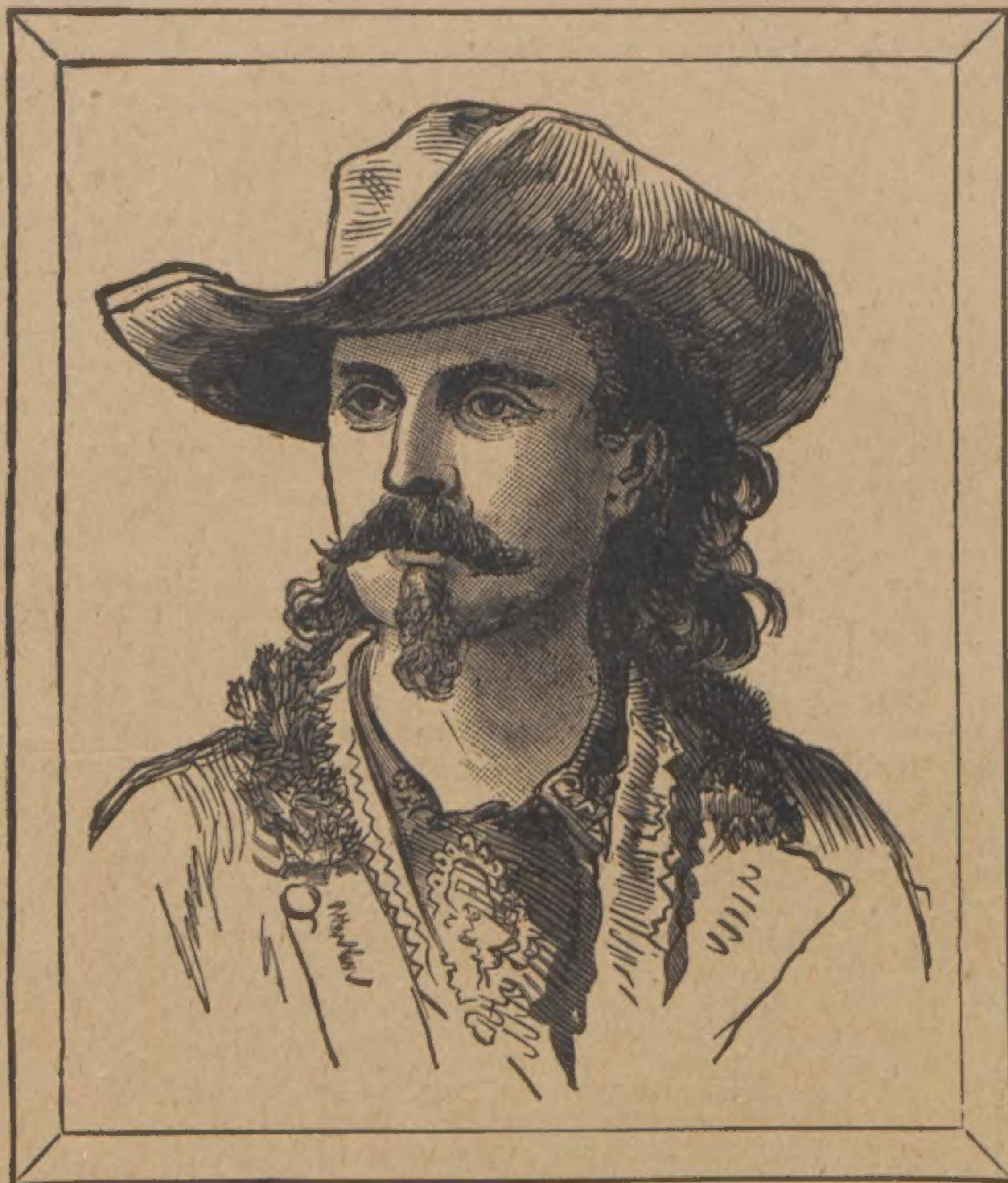
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